

KATHERINE MACDONALD



The  
Rose  
& the  
Thorn

Special Anniversary Edition



THE  
ROSE  
& THE  
THORN

KATHERINE MACDONALD

# THE ROSE AND THE THORN SPECIAL EDITION

KATHERINE MACDONALD



*For all those that still dream of finding 'happy ever after.'*

*May you find the thing that makes your soul sing—*

*The place that whispers, 'welcome, there you are, you are home.'*



The story of Beauty and the Beast has always captivated me. It's partly the fault of Disney's 1991 animated masterpiece—who could not fall in love with such witty dialogue, gorgeous animation, and brilliant score? But at its heart was a simpler story: the story of a girl who saved a beast.

There are precious few traditional fairy tales that depict women as the heroine, and while the original Beauty of Villeneuve's tale may have had little agency in her own story, it was nevertheless unique at the time. There were, however, a few things I found problematic about the tale: namely that Beauty comes to love the person keeping her prisoner, and that her father traded her freedom for his own. The Disney version retcons the latter with Belle making the trade herself, but it maintains the imprisonment element no matter how much the servants of the castle insist that she's a "guest."

Nevertheless, I had no plans to rewrite the tale myself until I had a dream of a girl wandering into a meadow filled with flowers, only to find herself a few moments later in a desolate castle, inhabited only by a beast. She became trapped not by him, but the laws of the land. It was a relationship founded on far more equal footing. That image formed the opening of what became *The Rose and the Thorn*—that, and the horrifying nightmare element of the dream: a pale face in the mirrors of the castle walls.

I published the original *The Rose and the Thorn* over four years ago, and to my utter astonishment, people actually enjoyed reading it. The story gave birth to an entire series, plus *Heart of Thorns*, the original story from the Beast's point of view, and finally has come to this—a special edition, combining the two different perspectives, with beautiful artwork, an

extended epilogue, and refined prose that's hopefully more poetic than ever.

I hope you enjoy reading it, as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Copyright © November 2023 by Katherine Macdonald

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. Small quotes may be used for the purpose of review.

This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

**This is an advanced review copy. If you have downloaded it from anywhere other than Booksprout.com, please delete immediately and purchase an official copy.**

**Please note that this is not the final product and formatting will be different in the final print book.**

Follow author at:

Twitter: @KateMacAuthor

Instagram: Katemacdonald89

TikTok: @Katemacauthor

Website: [Katherinemacdonaldauthor.com](http://Katherinemacdonaldauthor.com)

## CONTENTS

### Winter

1. One: Rose

2. Two: Thorn

3. Three: Rose

4. Four: Thorn

5. Five: Rose

6. Six: Thorn

7. Seven: Rose

8. Eight: Thorn

9. Nine: Rose

### Spring

10. Ten: Thorn

11. Eleven: Rose

12. Twelve: Thorn

13. Thirteen: Rose

14. Fourteen: Thorn

15. Fifteen: Rose



[16. Sixteen: Thorn](#)

[17. Seventeen: Rose](#)

[18. Eighteen: Thorn](#)

[19. Nineteen: Rose](#)

[Summer](#)

[20. Twenty: Thorn](#)

[21. Twenty-One: Rose](#)

[22. Twenty-Two: Thorn](#)

[23. Twenty-Three: Rose](#)

[24. Twenty-Four: Thorn](#)

[25. Twenty-Five: Rose](#)

[26. Twenty-Six: Thorn](#)

[27. Twenty-Seven: Rose](#)

[28. Twenty-Eight: Thorn](#)

[29. Twenty-Nine: Rose](#)

[30. Thirty: Thorn](#)

[31. Thirty-One: Rose](#)

[32. Thirty-Two: Thorn](#)

[33. Thirty-Three: Rose](#)

[34. Thirty-Four: Thorn](#)

[Autumn](#)

[35. Thirty-Five: Rose](#)

[36. Thirty-Six: Thorn](#)

[37. Thirty-Seven: Rose](#)

[38. Thirty-Eight: Thorn](#)

[39. Thirty-Nine: Rose](#)

[40. Forty: Thorn](#)

[41. Forty-one: Rose](#)

[42. Forty-Two: Thorn](#)

[43. Forty-Three: Rose](#)

[44. Forty-Four: Thorn](#)

[45. Forty-Five: Rose](#)

[46. Forty-Six: Thorn](#)

[47. Forty-Seven: Rose](#)

[48. Forty-Eight: Thorn](#)

[49. Forty-Nine: Rose](#)

[Also By...](#)

[50. Fifty: Thorn](#)

[51. Fifty-One: Rose](#)

[52. Fifty-Two: Thorn](#)

[53. Fifty-Three: Rose](#)

[54. Fifty-Four: Thorn](#)

[55. Fifty-Five: Rose](#)

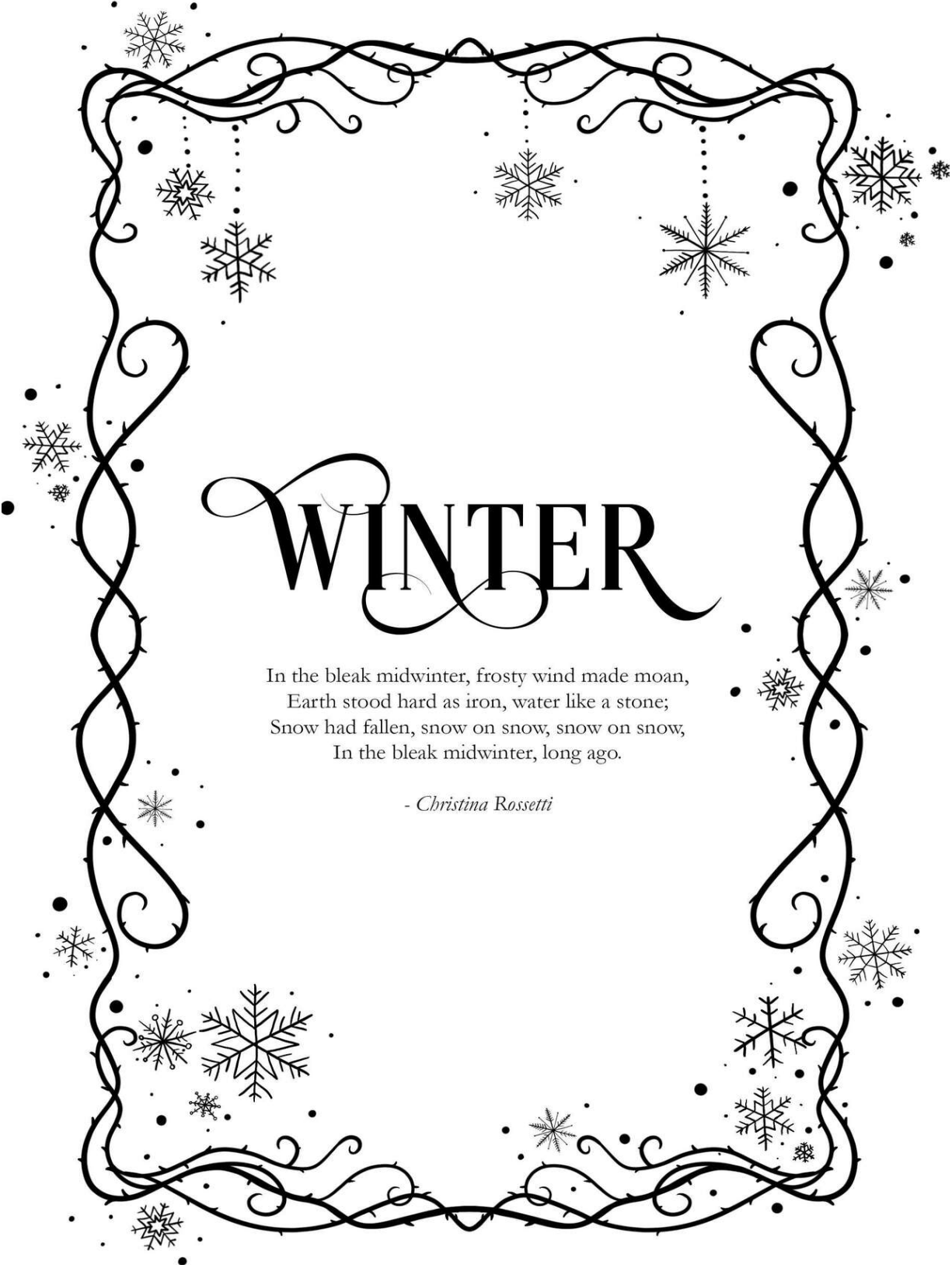
[56. Fifty-Six: Thorn](#)

[57. Fifty-Seven: Rose](#)

[58. Epilogue: Rose & Thorn](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

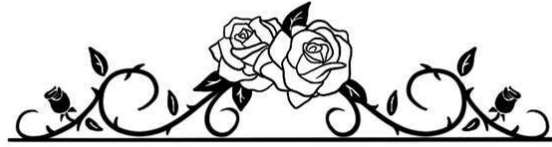


# WINTER

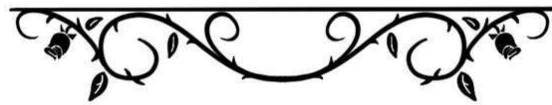
In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

- Christina Rossetti

# 1



## ROSE



Winter has haunted me since the year I turned nine, the year my mother died. The memories I have of that night are suspended in a snow globe of emotion, sharp and tangible as glass.

I was watching the snow fall thicker and thicker outside the window, falling so quickly and viciously it slid like volleys of arrows. My younger sister Hope had fallen asleep in my older sister's arms, and Honour, despite her best attempts, had drifted off too. Firelight flickered against their sleeping faces, two primrose cheeks pressed against each other, still, calm, immobile. Only Freedom and I were still awake, our ears pricked for the next of our mother's moans, Papa's reassuring words, Nanny's soft voice.

There were no reassuring words now, no soft, soothing voice of Nanny's. No moans, and no crying. An awful, penetrating silence, as sharp and hard as the cold north wind that kicked and screamed against every crevice.

The memory of that bitter, dark hour is so etched into my mind that I swear I can remember each knot in the floorboards beneath Freedom's pacing feet, each flake as it seared against the glass. I can count each time the fire dared to crackle.

Even now, as my breath ekes out in misty spurts, I see it hit that window pane, obscuring the icy tundra outside the window of the little house. I see the little girl reflected in the glass, who would be irrevocably altered before the night was over.

Since that day, winter has been my enemy. I have never been able to enjoy the first flakes of the season, build snowmen with my younger siblings. For years, I refused to even open the curtains on snowy days, would kick and scream whenever Nanny suggested a walk. I wanted to shut it out, to forget it existed, to forget the empty chair beside the fireplace, the hollow dip in the other side of Papa's bed. If I shut my eyes tight enough, buried my face deep into my pillow, I could still hear Mama singing in the kitchen, see the autumn wreath glowing in her golden hair. Winter had never come, had never claimed her.

Eight years later, the screaming has turned to grumbling, perhaps more today because Freedom is bossing me about and I shouldn't even be here. It was Honour's turn to gather with the hunting party, but she wasn't feeling well and so I took her place. "Call it an early wedding present," I snapped, a little harder than I meant to. Honour looked up at me gratefully nonetheless, and then proceeded to start retching again. Nanny wandered past our door and muttered something about "wedding nerves" rather gleefully.

I know Honour can't help being ill, but that doesn't lift my mood. The cold claws at every exposed inch of me as I ferret about the bushes, searching for the few pickings we haven't managed to scavenge. It is a bleak midwinter, the woods lie almost barren, and our stores do not fare much better. Poor Honour, who had dreamt so long of a spring wedding. It would be a meagre affair at this rate, all nuts and sour, salted meat. Freedom said she brought it on herself, "Who gets married in *winter*?" but she and Charles had said they simply could not wait any longer.

"Deer, deer!"

Something leaps out of the bushes; a dark, impish shape. I throw myself backwards, upsetting my basket, as a doe comes springing through the mist. A sudden streak of silver strikes through the air, accompanied by a short, sharp whistle.

The doe slumps to the ground, a bolt straight through her neck. The rest of the party arrives moments later with a bout of boyish cheer.

"Brilliant shot, Freed!" says Charles LePrince, stooping to admire Freedom's handiwork. Charles is one of perhaps a handful of people outside of my family that I actually like, as well as James Saintclair, another member of our party. Charles is one of those people it's very difficult not to like. He is effortlessly cheerful and kind and always

looking for ways to make people happy. His affable nature is matched only by Honour's.

"Thanks," says Freedom. "Fancy a pelt as a wedding present?"

"I should be the one to be presenting you with gifts," Charles gushes, breaking into a grin, "for allowing me to marry your beautiful sister—"

"Oh, hush," Freedom scoffs, "she's not all that—"

While the rest of the boys launch into an overly-detailed description of why my sister is, in fact, "all that", James Saintclair stops to help me up. My eyes are still rooted on the doe. I am no stranger to dead creatures, but there is something haunting about the splash of colour in this forest of black and white, the steaming spread of blood in the snow.

"Are you all right?" James asks. He picks up my empty basket, then awkwardly frets with the berries, picking them up one by one.

"Quite fine." I brush the snow off my shoulders, more from habit than vanity, then help him with the berries, scooping up big handfuls of snow in the process.

"Rose?" Freedom notices me standing under the tree and scowls. "Were you there the whole time?"

"Um, I suppose so, yes?"

"You should have stayed on the path! I could have shot you—"

It had not occurred to me until that moment how close the deer had been to me; a few feet between us was all. Another hunter might have missed.

Another hunter.

"What are you talking about, Freed? You, miss? In what world?" Charles claps his shoulder, but Freedom's gaze on me doesn't waver.

"Stay on the path, Rose!"

I glare back at him, and stop narrowly short of stamping my foot. "Shoot forward, Freedom!"

His scowl darkens, as it always does when people use his full name, but he turns nonetheless and heads back onto the path. The rest of the party follows suit. Even James Saintclair leaves my side to lift the deer. He is a big, strong fellow, but almost as gentlemanly as Charles. We grew up together, and many like to imagine us more than friends. Their suspicions are not without reason, yet despite what happened between us at the Mayor's winter party a few days ago, I have never really dwelled on the matter, or James' feelings on the subject.

*Is that wrong of me?* I wonder, picking up my basket. Do I owe him an explanation? Does he want one? Do *I* want one? I am not like Honour, dreaming of love and marriage. I find myself torn between longing for a life of peace and solitude or questing for adventure, but I do not know what James wants. I am too afraid to ask, and he is too polite to.

I sigh, pushing the thought away, and take two steps forward.

That's when I see it.

A glimmer of stark whiteness amidst the muddy grey, shining like a drop of starlight, at the foot of a tree just a little further from the path. A snowdrop.

It ought to be impossible. We are in the middle of winter. Spring is months away. It cannot be and yet... here it is.

I have to pluck it. I have to take it back to show Beau and my sisters. Or perhaps I can press it, make it part of a wedding present for Honour. I feel a tiny, pin-prickle of excitement rustle through me as I bend down to take it, stowing it safely in my basket.

Then I notice something else, something much more miraculous and completely impossible. Through the gap in the trees is glorious colour, a myriad of pink and yellow and orange, a sunset pressing through the gloom in the middle of the day.

I am too afraid to scrub my eyes, too fearful it might vanish. Instead, I push forwards, climbing through the branches, until my feet crunch against the floor of the field my mother used to take us to in summertime, to play in the stream that divided the land.

The field beyond the stream—which but yesterday had been a dark, grey slab in the landscape—has been transformed into a blossoming meadow.

I have to be dreaming, or it is some kind of mirage. It is so clear, so perfect. Soundlessly, I move through the snow-covered field and down towards the stream, expecting it to shimmer away any second, but the meadow just grows closer. There are daisies, buttercups, cowslips... long poppy stems, brushing blue skies. Blue skies overhead!

"It's not possible," I murmur, moving down to the water's edge.

There was a saying in our village. "Do not cross the stream at the end of the meadow." There were multiple stories as to the origins of the warning. Some said that fairies would come and snatch you away. Others said that something bad had happened to a child who strayed beyond the borders long ago. Most people agreed it was probably a remnant from the last war.

There had been a battle, not far from here, and enemy soldiers had once camped beyond the stream in the woodland that used to live there. Or so the people said.

Even Papa heeded the warnings. He used to scold Mama for taking us there, but she promised to keep us away from the stream. We were allowed to play in it, but not over it. Of course, the minute her back was turned, Freedom and I both rushed up the side and down again, giggling. Honour gasped and fretted for days, but she did not tell Mama. Perhaps she was afraid we would not be allowed there again.

The first day of spring after Mama died, I hopped over the stream once more. That time, I wanted it to snatch me away. I wanted it to take me to a faraway place, a place where Mama was still alive, or, if it couldn't do that, to take me to a place where it didn't hurt any more to miss her.

The pursuit of something equally impossible is why I am crossing it this day.

I gather up my skirts, tucking them into my belt, and swing my cloak over my shoulder. Securing my basket in the crook of my arm, I hop onto one of the large, flat stones in the riverbed. I move quickly, wishing my clothes weren't so heavy.

I haul myself up on the other side.

A part of me expects to find the mirage over, but it is still here; the tall, glistening meadow, the flowers swaying in the breeze. I laugh, overcome with giddiness, and run. My skirts and cape come loose and flare out behind me. Petals dance in the breeze, warm sun kisses my skin, and a soft spring wind plays with my hair. The sweet scent of—

I stop immediately. The flowers don't smell. All around me is pristine beauty, but all I inhale is cold, colourless, wintry air. I reach out, inching my fingers towards the petals of a poppy.

Mist rolls in. The sun vanishes. A cold chill sweeps across the meadow. The grass around me turns yellow and brittle, and the flowers crumble like ashes. If a scream escapes me, it is lost under the roar of the wind. My basket is pulled from my grasp. I start to run back towards the stream, but I can barely see two feet in front of me. The fog grows thicker and denser, and fastens around my throat like a rope.

*Where is the stream?*

It was here moments ago. It was right here. I... I must have been turned around. I've lost my bearings in the fog. I stop, trying to slow my



breathing, when my eyes fix on something in the distance. Dark, arrow-like tips slice through the cold haze. A building? There is nothing in the woods, nothing for miles. It must be a tree, although I can't remember one being there before. But what else could it be?

I creep closer, and the dark, looming shape rises far above the mist. Not a tree. Not a tree at all.

It's a castle, but not like any I have ever seen before. It is carved out of something much smoother than stone, barely visible behind the black tangles of brambles. It should be a shell, but as the fog dissipates, I can see windows and doors set in tall, solid walls. No ruin, although I have never seen anything in such a fixed state of complete disregard. The garden is a graveyard, both overgrown and utterly lifeless. It is a mass of thorns; all is black and grey. Once powerful fists of ivy cling to cold lumps of colourless stone. They must once have been statues, although of what, it is impossible to tell.

What on earth is a castle doing here?

The wind howls, and thunder claps across the sky. Rain slams against the stones. There is nothing for it; I race up the steps to the front of the castle, pausing only for a second at the door. It should be rotten or covered with barren ivy like the rest of the building, but although it is old and weathered, the ivy has snapped off around the frame, as if it has been opened recently.

The thunder claps again, and I wrench open the door and run inside.

Light protrudes into this dark and dismal place through the remains of the shattered windows. Shards of coloured glass lie scattered over the marble floor, tiny fragments of amber and blue amongst swathes of leaves. I have never seen coloured glass like this before. When I lean down to take a piece in my hand, it is surprisingly sturdy despite how thin and fine it is, and almost seems to shimmer, more like crystal than glass.

Screens of deserted spider webs coat the rest of the room, shielding a great deal of it from view. I can make out faint tapestries and pieces of furniture, but little else. Great pillars rise out of their trappings. They seem too narrow to hold the weight of this ceiling, and are carved with impossible precision, as if plucked from the mind of a painter. Ivy tumbles into the room, making it seem more tomb than palace.

Was this place some vestige from the war? Perhaps it had some silly tale attached to it too, like the stream, and the villagers had been told to be

wary of it. But why they wouldn't mention it is beyond me.

Or, perhaps... perhaps the tales weren't silly at all.

I drift over to a table in the corner. There is a small ivory-faced clock there, its hands frozen in motion, and a golden candlestick. A little drawer reveals a handful of matches. A few seconds later, and a gloomy light flickers into motion, illuminating the faded tapestries hanging from the walls. Great chunks of them are missing, threads dangling like shredded flesh. Bits of the woodwork are damaged too, but not by time. They look like they've been clawed, or even... bitten.

Thunder cracks against the sky. I jolt involuntarily, backing into a nearby bust. It crashes to the floor.

Somewhere, above me, another crash echoes out.

"Hello?" I call. "Is someone there?"

There is no reply, but the silence reverberates down the empty hallways.

I set my candle aside and pick up the bust. It is of an old, warty man, who frankly looks a little better without his bulbous nose. My concerns at ruining the piece of art are limited. It is clearly not the likeness of a person; his ears are webbed like a fish. A fanciful creation of an imaginative sculptor. I leave it where it lies and retrieve the candle.

"Hello?" I call up the stairs.

Nothing but my own voice bounces back. For a second, just a split second, I think I hear a voice, softer than the wind and even less substantial.

*Welcome, welcome, welcome...*

I am clearly imagining things, just like I must have imagined the field of flowers. Perhaps I tripped somewhere and banged my head—

Another crash, a scrambling. Something big moving about.

"Hello?" I creep up the steps, trying not to sound afraid.

Something, a dark, shadowy thing, runs from one door to another. Inside the other room, there is another crash, a low moan, like the sound of an animal.

Whatever it is, it is not human.

But it is also afraid of me.

The dust in the air seems to breathe, and swirls about the space like a ribbon caught in a breeze. There are footsteps in the dust, huge, massive paws, as wide as a bear's, long as a wolf's. What creature lurks behind that door?

Freedom's voice resonates in my head, telling me to be cautious. I can see him drawing an arrow, but I ignore him. I remember Mama telling me, when I was frightened by a stray dog as a little child, that he was more frightened of me than I was of him. I saw the way he cowered under the horse cart, the way his brows furrowed and his eyes widened, and I knew she was right.

I step into the room.

The creature paws at the door at the back of the room, half-hidden by shadows and a large wing-back chair. A huge, bear-like paw scrapes at the wood, and a long, wolfish tail sweeps the floor. The rest is just a black shape.

I set down my candle, eyeing the poker near the fireplace just in case.

"It's all right," I say, as calmly as I can muster, "I won't hurt you."

The creature stops pawing at the door almost immediately. For a second, I think I hear it whimper, or sigh, but I must be mistaken. The sounds I'm imagining are too human for whatever this is.

It turns towards the chair between us, grasping at the arms, and I catch a brief flash of its face. A single blue eye stares at me through a hole in the back of the chair.

The huge paws have nails like talons. My fingers itch, involuntarily, for the poker. I pray it cannot see that fear in me.

"I won't hurt you," I repeat. "Come on... come out from behind there. Let me see you."

The creature groans and shakes its head. No, I *thought* it shook its head. It is an animal, and animals cannot shake their heads in reply.

I act as if they can. "I'm not afraid," I say, "and you shouldn't be either. Won't you come out?"

The creature lets out another sigh, making a motion almost like a shrug of defeat. Its gaze screws to the floor, looking down almost... almost as if it is ashamed. Then it steps out into the murky light and rises to its full height.

It is as tall as a bear, broad and wide, covered from head to toe in black fur. It is slimmer than a bear though, with rear legs like wolf's. Its face... it has such a strange, twisted face. Part lion, part wolf, with a flat snout and nostrils, and a thick mane sprouting at its neck. Two small horns loom over two massive eyes, shadowed by wild eyebrows. I could not have dreamt up such a creature. No, creature is not the word. Creatures can be

animals, can be fairies, can be beautiful and wondrous. No, this thing is a beast.

“Oh, crickets.” My voice feels numb in my mouth. It is like I am looking down on the scene from afar, watching someone else speak for me. I have no idea where the courage comes to speak my next few words. “You’re certainly a strange-looking fellow.”

The beast sighs and sags, returning to its hiding place behind the chair. It is wearing a red cape, fastened around its neck with a clasp. What kind of beast wears clothing?

The blue eye spies me from the hole. “I’ve heard worse.”

A sudden squeak escapes me, and I knock back into the wall, clasping my hand to my mouth. I slide to the floor, spitting out curses and taking fitful snatches of air.

“You... you can *talk*!”

“Quite well, so I’m told.”

“You can *talk*! You’re talking!”

“Yes.”

“But... but... but...” As I stumble on my words, it occurs to me that stranger things have happened in the past... hour? I have lost track of time. “What are you?” I ask finally. “What... what is this place? Where am I? *Who are you?*”

The Beast sighs. “I am... only what you see,” he says. His voice is deep, and rumbles like the thunder still churning across the skies. “As for this place, it is hard to describe. It is a hidden place, a place of a power all but faded. It appears in your world but twice a year, and then vanishes into the ether.”

“I was in the field,” I splutter. “I was in the woods, and then I saw this place, over the stream... You can’t... you can’t move a *castle*.”

“And you cannot make a beast speak, yet here I am.”

“This... this isn’t possible! This is the sort of thing from... from *stories*.” I had spent all of my life with my head half in the clouds, half in-between the pages of the books I devoured, and for many of those years, I thought I believed in the tales they told. It was only now, in this moment, I realise I was wrong. I never believed, not truly.

“Stories,” the Beast replies, “must come from somewhere.”

This is too much. I sink my head into my hands and breathe deeply. *In, out, in, out*. I try to count, to steady the heart that is beating frantically

against my chest. I pinch my temples, feeling the short, sharp pain. I am awake. I am not dreaming.

"I'd like to go home now," I say eventually, my voice a faint whisper.

The Beast lowers himself to the ground, and shrinks back into the shadows by the empty fireplace. "I am so sorry," he says. "Truly, I am. For your sake. You will not be able to return tonight."

"What?" My insides freeze. *No, no, no...*

"Why not?"

"The portal." His voice is low. "The gateway between my world and yours. It has shut."

"When will it open again?" I try to keep my voice steady, but I am afraid of his answer. I am afraid because I already know.

"The portal opens but twice a year," he repeats, and fixes me with his cool, blue eyes. "I am sorry."

"No!" I shout. "No, you're wrong!"

Panic grips me. I stare at him, waiting for him to change his words, to make them not true. I cannot be stuck here. I will not be.

His expression—what little I can discern from it—does not waver, and the truth hits me like a punch to the gut.

"No," I say numbly. "*No!*"

I turn on my heels and flee the room, paying no heed to whatever he calls after me. I yell at him to leave me alone. He doesn't. I can hear him behind me as I race back down the stairs and out into the full-blown storm.

Rain pummels my face, sharp winds pulls at my clothes and hair. I have to wrestle with my skirts just to get down the steps. The sound is enormous. Grey clouds arch like waves, the thunder roars. The landscape is shrouded in a dark, moving haze. I can see so little, but I don't care. This place will not keep me.

I find the empty field and keep on running. Undergrowth snaps at my heels. Overhead, there is a flash of lightning. The drums of thunder follow, so strong that the earth beneath me shudders and convulses.

I race further into the field. The skies are so dark it could be night. The rain sears against my skin, the cold burns my throat. I want to scream, but there's no breath left in me.

*Where am I?*

Lightning strikes the ground a few paces ahead. I let out a soundless shriek, toppling into a nearby bramble patch. I fight against the thorns,

shredding my fingers, but it strikes again before I can move, closing in on me like some kind of predator.

*Can lightning do this?*

The castle has been swallowed up by blackness, but so has everything else. I can't see anything. No path, no escape, no way out. I spin around hopelessly, searching for something to guide me, to pull me out. A part of me expects Freedom to appear out of nowhere and drag me to safety, but another, larger part of me knows, with absolute certainty, that he is not coming. No one is.

I call out his name anyway. I call for Papa, and Honour, and Hope, and Beau... I even call for Mama, praying that she will take me.

The clouds clash overhead, the lightning cracks, the thunder booms, and for a minute, I think I might be dying. My breath stills, my eyes drift, and all thoughts seem to dribble away.

## 2



I take off my cloak and wrap it around the girl's shoulders. She is in no condition to move. There is no resistance, no acknowledgement, when I lift her into my arms and carry her back to the castle. She murmurs under her breath. I catch a begging for freedom, and a plaintive wail for her parents, before she passes out completely.

It has been a long time since I touched anything alive, but I take no joy in this. Sometimes, I think, my curse is not as cruel as the cure. It is bitterly, wretchedly unfair for these poor girls to endure this torment for my sake.

Although, at least their sentence is only six months. Mine may be for life. And the 'cure' will kill me if it doesn't save me.

I take her into one of the upstairs bedrooms, the first we come to. A fine guest room in gold and white, and the favourite of the last girl who came here. It is smaller than the others, perhaps a little more cosy.

I deposit her carefully on the grand bed. Her hands are bleeding, so I take a journey to the roof garden to collect some of the healing water that resides there. It is not very potent anymore, but I suppose it will be better than nothing.

When I return, her wet clothes have already been removed, and her hands bandaged. She sleeps soundly under the covers. I thank the fairies, not knowing if they are there, and douse her hands with the water. Then I

light a fire—the fairies must be busy, or have expunged their magic for today—and leave her alone.

I've put her through enough for one day.



Sleep does not come easily. Emotions churn and tangle in my mind. There is the traditional sympathy, of course, the inevitable guilt. Then the fear, again, the nervousness. What will she think of me, tomorrow? Will she hate me, scorn me, curse me, ignore me? Will she be kind, angry, indifferent? Will she forgive me, befriend me, care for me?

It is too soon to hope, but never too soon to worry.

When sleep evades me still, I move to walk the halls. They are just as gloomy as they always were, but when I turn into the dining room, I see the cobwebs have been swept away. The fairies are trying to make the place presentable again.

I do not want them wasting their magic, especially as there are two of us to cook for now, to make fires for, to clothe and heat. I tell them this, but, as always, hear nothing in reply. I grab a broom and continue what they've started instead, then start polishing the silver as best I can. Sweeping is easy enough with hands like mine. Polishing requires a little more dexterity than my paws can manage, but it is better than nothing. I decide to go and chop wood when I have done what I can. This is one task I have never done poorly. I often do not bother to heat the place myself, unless for light. With fur as thick as mine and nothing that resembles winter here, the cold is rarely bothersome. The girl, I reason, will want it warm.

I wonder what her name is.

Eventually, sleep comes. I make it back to my room and sink into my pile. I should probably start sleeping in a bed again, acting a little bit like the presentable human. Margaret would have a fit if she could see my current living quarters. When I first started sleeping on the ground as a child, she would fret and fuss and hiss until I crawled back into bed. I often got too warm under the covers, but I grew used to it. But after three



years of no company, I had slipped into some poor habits. Some days, I didn't even leave my den. What's the point?

I kept a routine for months after my last visitor left. I would wake at the usual time, breakfast, walk through the gardens, climb a tree, go for a swim. I chased animals when there were still animals to chase. Then I'd sit alone at the long table for lunch. I'd watch the world through the mirrors, until they stopped working. I would read, stare at an atlas, dream until the dreaming fell deaf. I read until my eyes hurt, till the words lost meaning. I would run through the corridors. I would sing, dance, try to learn an instrument. I tested the limits of the castle and grounds. I memorised every lock and bar. I knew my cage well.

And now, I need to learn to share it.



I was fifteen when the first guest arrived.

Though the gateway had opened twice every year for as long as I could remember, no one had ever drifted across it before that year. The fairies that had been my caretakers all of my life had spoken about going out themselves and luring someone in, but none of them were keen on the morality of that, especially when I was so young. Sometimes I would ghost the gateway during the solstices, treading the fog, hoping for just a glimpse of another person. Not even to fall in love with them, but just to talk. I wanted other children. A real friend.

I did not go down that first year. The first I knew of our guest was Ophelia crashing into the room so fast she tripped over, wings spasming with nervous energy.

"There's... there's..." Her vivid aquamarine eyes were wild, lit up like crystal chandeliers.

"Steady on, 'Phelia," Ariel sighed. "What's got you in a tizzy?"

"There's a girl in the castle!" she squealed, the words rushing out as one. She lifted into the air, twirling around the room, her short green hair flying out like a halo. She was a small, tiny thing. Part pixie, part nymph. Half

the size of the others and a dwarf beside me, by then. I could never remember being smaller than her.

She flew around me. “Are you ready? I’m ready!”

I was overcome with an intermingling of hope and dread, so tangible I could choke on it. I felt like I was going to be sick.

Margaret leapt to her feet, patting down her brown curls and shaking out her skirts. She was the most ordinary-looking of my guards, a prim and stately woman of advanced years, even for one of the Fey. Only her owl-eyes spoke of her heritage. A syren.

“Hello?” a voice called from the foyer.

“I’ll go and introduce myself,” Margaret rushed. “You two... make him more... presentable. I’ll try and explain the situation.”

I think she thought to bring her to us, but despite over a decade to get used to this idea, we found ourselves completely unprepared. Ophelia brushed my mane, forcing me into a smart doublet. “Only one chance for a first impression!” she trilled.

“Be yourself,” Ariel advised. “Be confident!”

“I don’t think I can be both.”

Ariel smiled, unusually warmly. She was the youngest of the three, a full fairy with yellow hair, green eyes, and glittering, golden wings. Her grin was pure mischief almost all of the time. “If she doesn’t like you, that’s her problem.”

It was a nice sentiment, but she was wrong, of course. I needed her to love me. We all did.

“She’s only the first,” she continued. “Don’t worry about making her love you. Just try to make a friend.”

At these words, I felt my fears ebbing away. A friend, a friend! How long I’d wanted one of those for!

I picked up the pace, skidding into the corridor, racing out in the foyer to greet her. She stood below, a sweet, pretty girl in a powder-blue cape with flowers in her hair. Penelope.

“Hello!” I announced. “Nice to meet you, I’m—”

My name, underused and rarely spoken, was wrenched away from me by the sound of her scream. I didn’t know people could scream like that when they weren’t in pain, on and on, like the cascades of a waterfall.

I didn’t know that screams could crawl under your skin, and shatter parts of you you’d never really thought about before.

I managed not to cry in front of her, but a few hours later, when she was safely ensconced in our finest guest room, it all came flooding out of me.

"It's all right," Margaret said, patting my hand. "She just doesn't know you yet. You can't blame people for their first reaction."

"Just give her a bit of time, she'll come around," advised Ophelia.

I lifted my head from the pillow, and turned towards the final fairy. "Ariel?"

"Nah," she said, "screw her. Pick one that doesn't scream at you."

"Ariel!" hissed Margaret.

"Look, I know he's not much of a looker by conventional means, but he's not that terrifying to look at! Any girl whose first instinct is to scream isn't worth his time. I don't know. Maybe I'm biased." She reached across and tugged my ear. "Whatever anyone says to you, no matter what they shout or scream, you are utterly adorable, kid. Don't let anyone make you feel otherwise."

It was easy to believe her at first. But not forever. Not when the next one laughed when I told her what my name meant, and said she would call me "Beast" instead. Not when she only looked me in the eye to insult me. Not when the one after that avoided looking at me entirely.

Felicity didn't scream. She threw something heavy at me instead, before drawing the poker like a sword.

I liked her best of all, but not enough.

I have never liked anyone enough.

And they certainly have not liked me.

But this girl... this newcomer... she didn't scream. I'd noticed her eyes darting towards the poker, but she never used that. She called me a *strange-looking fellow*, and then clapped her hand to her mouth when I revealed that I could talk. She tried very hard not to be rude, not to be afraid.

*Pick one that doesn't scream at you.*

I do not have the luxury of 'picking' any of them, but at least it's a start.



I sleep in, having been up so late, and rush to get dressed in the morning. I should invite the new guest down for breakfast, try to make her feel welcome, perhaps give her a tour. But when I arrive at her door, it is clear she has already left. My ears detect no sound from within, not a whiff of her behind it. She smells good, the girl, like winter and roses and redberries.

My senses lead me towards the armoury, where I find her attacking one of the dummies. It became a favourite haunt of Felicity's after she discovered it, and decided she was going to spend her captivity learning how to fight. All the other girls ignored it entirely. Isabella headed straight for the music room when she emerged from her chamber. Penelope was drawn to the menagerie, back when it was still filled with animals. None of them had ever been so bold as to pick up a weapon and start destroying things on their first day. It is a strange picture, this wild girl in a ballgown, wielding a blade with the strength of a warrior, a tangled surge of red-brown curls spilling down the back of her unlaced dress.

I summon my courage. "My, remind me never to anger you."

She jumps as she turns around, but she doesn't scream. She doesn't do anything but stare at me. She is not repulsed, but there is something else in her eyes. Anger, perhaps. She would not be the first to blame me. In fact, I'm half-surprised she doesn't turn the blade on me.

"Good morning," I continue, trying to sound as cheerful—as human and unthreatening—as it is possible to be, and trying not to look at the remains of the dummy. She really has done a number on it. "Has the world outside changed so much that all young ladies are now schooled in sword fighting?"

She continues to glare at me. "No."

This is going splendidly so far. She's an excellent conversationalist. My mind flails for a moment, struggling for something to follow. "Then you must be a rare maiden indeed to... decimate a dummy so."

She says nothing to this either, but thankfully her belly fills the silence.

"You are hungry," I say, wishing I'd thought to mention food first. It would have been a better conversation opener than commenting on her penchant for destruction. "Allow me to offer you breakfast, at least."

She nods numbly, and I step away from the door to let her pass, giving her plenty of room. I guide her to the dining room, glad whatever remains of the fairies or their magic saw fit to clean this room in advance. It is still

damp and dusty, but without the troves of cobwebs. The gold and white furnishings help elevate the gloom that infects most of the castle, as if colour was sucked away when the garden died. The air is filmy with underuse.

I pull out a chair clumsily and gesture for her to sit before springing away, letting her push it in herself. I hover by the side of the room, unsure of my next word, my next action.

“You’ll find food readily available here, whenever you want it,” I explain. “I do not know quite how it works, but it keeps me alive, so...” Partially a lie, although not much. I’m *still* unsure how they manage it. Still unsure if they’re really still here, or if it’s just their magic remaining, an echo of life.

She lifts her lid carefully, her expression betraying nothing as she eyes a hearty porridge underneath. Her fingers tremble as she lifts the spoon to her lips, as if her appetite has waned.

“You may go or do whatever you like here,” I tell her. “The castle is your...” I stop just short of saying ‘home’. I am not sure that would be a welcome word, not yet. “Yours to explore,” I finish. “That being said, the chamber at the end of the western corridor. The one with the gold door. Please refrain from going in there.”

“Why?” she asks. “What’s in there?”

I try not to smile at her curiosity, and a joke slips out in place of any cautious thought. “The bodies of my former brides.”

I wait for her to startle, or laugh, or for the look of abject horror to take over... but it doesn’t come. She merely blinks at me. “Well, I can understand your wanting to keep that hidden,” she replies, just as calmly.

“It’s a... a personal request,” I add. “I would keep it to myself.”

Even after all this time, I want to keep Mother’s room safe for her. I don’t want it to be a spectacle.

“Your name,” I ask, realising I still don’t know it, “what is it?”

“Rose,” she says quietly. “De Villeneuve.”

It is perfect, with her dewy skin and red-brown hair, like a rose made human. Her prickly nature even matches the thorns. I want to tell her that it suits her, but I feel like any compliments would be unwelcome. Instead, I tell her, “You may call me Beast, for that is what I am.”

Privately, I wish she’d ask for another name to call me by. No one has, not yet.

My given name was never used, everyone favouring pet names or my title as a child. It hardly feels like my own at all. But I should like to be asked it.

Rose looks down, and starts to nibble at her breakfast. She does not speak again.

\*

Rose drifts away from the room after awkwardly stirring her porridge for a long while, managing only a few mouthfuls. She gives a slight nod of the head in lieu of parting, barely looking at me as she makes her escape. I hover in her trail long after she departs, wondering if I should offer her a tour. A fine, quiet anger emanates from her, and I think the better of it. She's not crying. She's not shouting. Perhaps this is the best that I can expect.

Perhaps she will be like the second girl, Isabella. She barely spoke to me at all, occasionally tolerating my presence. She was not very afraid of me, she just hated me. The disdain poured out of her.

Still, I cannot shake the look in Rose's eyes, when she first beheld me. No horror, no hatred. Not even pity. Surprise, embarrassment, amazement, even. There had been no hatred then.

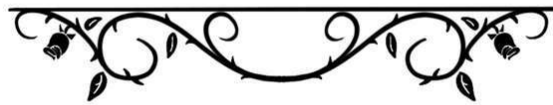
I shake it away, retiring to the library, rustling through an old favourite in an attempt to keep my thoughts away from her. It is not easy. I hear her footsteps in the corridors, and the air in the castle has shifted, as if breathing. Phantoms stir in the dust.

The place is more dead for her living in it, and as I occasionally glimpse her in the garden, I wonder which one of us is the ghost.

# 3



## ROSE



We part ways, almost silently, after I have finished a few more mouthfuls. My gaoler, the Beast, my unwitting host—whatever he may be—hovers in my trail long after I have departed. I see him lurking in the shadows as I ascend the main staircase. I know he must be thinking of following me, perhaps offering me a tour, but thinks the better of it. Good, he is learning. Learning that there is no point in trying to befriend me. Maybe he believes my resolve will soften over time, but he does not know me. There were days, weeks even, after Mama's death, where the only sounds I uttered were sobs. I spoke to no one. I can retreat into my grief like a shell, emerging only when I see it is safe to. When the way opens to go home.

I have no need for a friend. No need for anyone. I am perfectly fine by myself.

This is the mantra I repeat to myself as I explore the castle.

It is hard to put to words the precise state of the decay and desolation etched into the walls of this forgotten place. There is a pale, penetrating loneliness chiselled into every statue. A kind of loneliness made living. It haunts every rock and stone, every sinew of every room. A whispering,

blistering loneliness. In a breath's moment, I swear I can hear voices, and at the exact same time, all I can hear is the deafening sound of utter nothingness.

The gardens are a desolate wasteland, a graveyard of trees and statues. A seasonless, flavourless, hollow place. Nothing but dust and dirt, the shrapnel of nature, coats the dry ground. The trees are as thin as bones. They hang like skeletons, and when I reach out to grab a low-hanging branch, it snaps in my hand and dissolves into shards of brittle bark. I have never seen a place outside of a picture book containing so many shades of grey and brown.

The base of the castle is home to several ruined outbuildings and follies, empty stables, a deserted coach house—a plethora of lifeless residences of stone and mortar. Any plant life I come across mirrors death too; although, when I examine one of the rose bushes and dig down to the wick, there is a slight flash of green. Not quite dead, then, sleeping, although I have never seen sleep so still before.

There are no birds here, no insects. No sounds at all except the scrunch of stone underfoot. It makes me miss the snow, and the sound of inane chatter. I have never been one for noise, vastly preferring the company of books to people, but I crave noise now. I long for any kind of sound. Is this what it feels to be a ghost, alone in some kind of half world?

A large stretch of water lies at the edge of the castle grounds, sheathed in mist. The water, what little of it I can see, is crystal clear, but it is a void, empty of life. The surface is taut, like the skin of a drum, but looks hard and shiny as glass. The bottom is robed with rocks and pebbles and dirt. Not even weeds will grow in this place. My foot catches on a stone as I try to turn away. I pick it up, thumb it gingerly, then hurl it into the waters. Ripples shatter the surface and glide outwards. I hear the sound of it sink to the floor, and a bubble breaks to the top. The sound is as blissful as it is haunting.

I wander as far as the endless meadow, and haunt the edge for some time, staring out at the rolling mists and knowing they shield nothing. It takes only some thirty minutes at a good pace from my door to the stream where I crossed into this place. How can that thirty minutes have turned into six months?

A few feet ahead of me, before the mist truly expands, a tiny spot of colour catches my eye. A little glint of red. For a second, I know I must be



imagining it. There is no colour here. I close my eyes and wait for it to go away. But it's still there.

Tentatively, I creep forward, certain that it will vanish before I reach it. It doesn't. The mist even appears to roll back, revealing the cause; my basket, half-filled with berries from the last hunt, and my single, solitary snowdrop.

I do not know what I intend to do with them, but I am glad to have the basket returned to me. It is of no particular value, sentimental or otherwise, but it is mine, and I have so little of that here, that I scoop up the basket and its contents eagerly, and head back the way I came.

It is now about midday. I tire of the gardens. There is still plenty to explore, but it does not interest me anymore. Clutching my basket tightly, I head back up the castle via the kitchen entrance. The ruins of a once-great herb garden front the doors. It reminds me longingly of my garden at home, although mine was nowhere near this size. Gardening is my second love, after literature. It pains me to see such devastation.

Hardly knowing why, I drop down on my knees, scrabble about in the dirt, and bury my little horde. There is no hope in me that they will grow, but perhaps I need to believe that something good can live in such a place.



Getting back to my room is difficult. I take several wrong turns through the winding corridors before finding my way to the entrance hall. I remember to turn right at the top of the stairs, but I have no idea which door is mine. I don't even know what *mine* means. What does it matter which room I go to? There's nothing of mine in there.

But I want something that I have used before, if only for a few hours.

I fling back each door I come to, taking no note of the contents, searching into the gloom for the right place. Finally, I find my door. My clothes have been brought back, and I immediately shed my gaudy trappings, shredding away the frills and layers with such force that they begin to tear.

I find a plate of bread and cheese, some dried fruit, and a pot of lukewarm tea waiting for me. Did the Beast bring it up, or... the castle? He said to go to the dining room for food, didn't he? Either way, I'm barely hungry. I pick at it a little and sip at the tea.

I don't feel like doing any more exploring, so I try to find something in the room to occupy myself with. There are three books on the dresser; a sentimental book of poetry—the sort Mama would have liked—a book on fairy tales, and a well-thumbed adventure romance. I think I've read the last one before, and it offers me a small home comfort despite its tedious prose. There must be a better selection somewhere in this castle, but I lack the energy to search for it and don't want to ask the Beast. I wrap myself in a blanket, settle down by the fire, and lose a good three hours in it.

The clock ticks too loudly, and I am incredibly aware of how slow time is passing. *Hurry*, I urge it, *please*.

By the day's end, I have read half of my available material and am not keen to resort to the sentimental drivel. Neither do I want to leave the room. A great, claw-footed tub sits beside the fire. I draw myself a bath and get to work untangling my curls and scrubbing away the dirt, a task I make last as long as possible. Then I comb it out and sit beside the fire. There's a small sewing box to the left of the hearth. It feels out of place in such a grand room—would not the previous occupant have had servants to manage such tasks?—but it is a welcome find. I can set to work fixing the damage I did to the dress earlier.

One of the sleeves is hanging on by a thread, a seam is split, and some of the fabric has frayed as a result. I never much cared for puffy sleeves anyway, so I turn them into cap sleeves instead. I'd ripped several of the frilly layers in my haste too, so I take those off entirely, slimming the dress down considerably.

I work for most of the night, unpicking needless embroidery, trimming layers, disposing of ribbons and gauze. My fingers start to ache, and I realise that the strange, fuzzy pain from the brambles has gone. I unwrap my hands to inspect the cuts, and pause.

There is not a blemish on them.



There is no routine to the next few days. The only consistency is that each hour is spent trying not to count the hours. I breakfast alone in my room, then pick up my sewing, attempting to make something comfortable from the gaudy gowns. I re-read the books, or borrow one from another of the bedrooms. Sometimes I wander the gardens, but I always seem to find myself in the gloomiest of places and this does nothing to improve my mood. Occasionally, I drift into the armoury. Target practice offers some release, but I get little enjoyment from sword play. I keep hearing Freedom's condescending voice in my ear and even though I want to use the blade to spite him, the mere memory makes me ill. I wouldn't be here if I'd listened to him and stayed on the path.

After the first few evenings, the castle shows signs of learning my habits. The fire is always made up when I want it, and a bath is prepared every evening. I eke out a little joy from this, experimenting with the basket of potions and concoctions that sits beside it. One turns the water golden and makes my skin smell of honey, another glitters like starlight. A third turns the bubbles into fresh flowers, that sadly only last until the water cools.

I think of Honour, with the last one, and the dress she had made for her wedding. How badly she wanted flowers for it. How badly I want to be there. A girl who grows up in a sleepy village with her head in a book should be glad of the opportunity for adventure, but although the castle is expansive, I feel its walls shrinking against me. No matter how far I can wander, I know the place is still a cage. I can't deny that my curiosity heightens with each passing day, however. I do want to know the history of this prison, how it became one.

The Beast remains a stranger to me during this time. Sometimes I see him, lurking in the shadows nearby, or glancing at me from an upstairs window. I pay him no heed, hoping that he'll vanish altogether if I ignore him for long enough.

I explore a few rooms of the castle each day. I take my time in this, for once I have seen all the rooms I will know the true limits of my cage.

Every morning, I open a door, and examine the contents inch by inch, like a prisoner stroking the bars of his cell. I am methodical in my approach, picking one floor, one corridor. Once inside, I run my fingers over each surface, disturbing dust inches thick. Years of dirt are scraped away. Many of the rooms house nicer objects than mine; mine is too gaudy, the furniture large and clunky. These venerable places are sparsely but beautifully decorated; dressers as slim as silver birch branches, curtains as finely-woven as spider's silk, paintings that look as if a fairy's breath was captured on a canvas. Everything is delicate and dainty and as perishable as a cloud. And yet, somehow, has endured the ages.

When I am feeling a little more daring, or searching for some amusement, I raid the rooms for books, trinkets, and items of clothing. I am richly rewarded, finding beautiful dresses, soft slippers, tomes of lore, fur coats. I feel like a pirate, taking my spoils back to my chamber and ferreting them away.

One morning, I come across a little bedroom not far from the kitchens. A servant's room. It is just as prettily decorated as some of the finer chambers. Like all of them, it is covered in cobwebs, but it lacks the neatness of the others. There is a book half-open on the bedside table, an empty cup and saucer, papers over the desk, a half-worn candle. The bed is not pristinely made, the covers are crumpled, and the hairbrush on the dresser still has several fine, white-gold hairs clinging to the bristles. This is a room that was used and loved, and then, quite suddenly, abandoned.

I admire some of the fine, floaty gowns in the wardrobe. The material is so light it is almost insubstantial. But for some reason, I do not want to take any of them. There is still a feeling that they belong to someone.

A glint of sunlight twinkles in the corner of the mirror. I glance up, but it has already disappeared. There is no sunlight here, I remind myself. It was probably only a reflection.

*But of what? I wonder. There is nothing in here that casts light.*

# 4



After a week, Rose has explored most of the rooms to one side of the castle, and her attention finally turns to the ballroom—the *throne* room. Even in its abandoned state, its grace and elegance shimmer through the cascades of ivy, the swatches of white and the tiny flashes of gold peering through the foliage. It has never quite gained the grey, grainy quality of the rest of the castle. Never quite lost a sense of life.

At the end of the room, in a melted heap, sits the remains of my mother’s throne, and behind her the scorched portrait of her and my father. I often come in here to stare at the way their hands touch, especially as the other means I had to watch them has long since evaporated. In this still palace, this desecrated image is all I have left of him.

Rose stands in a patch of sunlight, wearing a deep blue gown that is unlaced at the back. I can see her bare flesh spanning out from her shoulders and spine. The strangest, faintest urge to tug the end of one of her curls flutters up inside, but I stick to the shadows where I belong, uncertain where that bubble of familiarity came from.

She half-raises her hand towards the portrait. “What happened here?”

The sound of her voice breaks the glassy silence. I am stunned by it, so much so that it takes me a moment to realise she is talking to me. I peer out from behind my pillar. “I’m sorry, are you talking to me?”

“Is there anyone else here for me to talk to?”

“No,” I say quietly, hanging my head, “I suppose not.”

“You suppose?”

“The magic that sustains this place—what little there is left of it—it was alive once. I do not believe it is, anymore.”

I think longingly of Ariel, Margaret, and Ophelia. Of what they are now, if anything. It has been so long since they fell silent, since they vanished completely. If they were alive—truly alive—I was certain they would let me know.

Sometimes, I thought I heard them. The faint tinkling of bells. A glimmer in the corner of my eye. But nothing else.

They had been incorporeal too long to ever return. I was almost sure of it.

Rose looks at me. “So... what happened here?”

“A great battle was fought,” I explain, careful not to reveal too much. I want to satisfy her curiosity. I want to talk to her. But I have learned the hard way not to let them know what I truly am. “Between light and darkness.”

“Who won?”

“Neither. In the end, both parties destroyed one another, and this place along with it.”

“Why does it appear in my meadow twice a year?”

“It doesn’t,” I reply. “It can appear in many places, all over the world. It’s just by chance it appeared to you.”

“Then why does it appear at all?”

*To give me a faint chance of one day being free.* But, of course, I cannot tell her this.

“Old magic,” I settle on. “It has rules that must be followed. Every curse cast must have a chance of being broken.”

“Every curse?” Her eyes brighten. I notice, in the gathering light of our semblance of morning, how green they are. Not like gemstones. Something more natural, like a meadow swamped by sun, or the distant hills at dawn. They’re almost fey, especially when they flicker, sparked by awe. “This place is under a spell?”

I would have thought that much was obvious, but I humour her. “It is not merely a castle.”

“What else is it?”

“A prison.” The word escapes me before I can claw it back. She baulks at me, and I wonder if I’ve said too much. If she’ll figure it out. After all,

who else is imprisoned here but me?

“How long have you been here?”

“My entire life.” My voice is very light, waiting for her to ask something else I cannot answer. “I know no other home but this.”

“But if the way opens twice a year—”

“Somehow, I do not think I would be too warmly received in your world.”

Something moves in those green-glass eyes of hers, an emotion I cannot discern. “You have not been alone here all this time?”

I shake my head. “There were survivors, after the war. Loyal servants. They were my constant companions for many years. Then the magic that sustains this place began to wane. They sacrificed themselves to ensure it didn’t fade completely, becoming part of the very walls.”

The admission hangs in the air between us for a moment. It is impossible to gauge Rose’s reaction. She doesn’t know what they were to me, after all. I called them *servants*. That is the least of what they were.

“Have you been alone since then,” she asks eventually, “or have other people found their way in?”

“Seven, including you. But not one for almost three years.”

For a moment, she says nothing. I half expect that to be the end of the conversation. It’s an abrupt end, but she is bored of me now. Perhaps she thinks I’m trying to guilt her into conversing with me, and is having none of it.

“What do you do?”

I was not expecting this. “I’m sorry?”

“How do you fill your time?” she asks.

“I er, I mean, sometimes...” I don’t think I’ve ever been asked this before, and I’m surprised she’s given up asking about an enchanted castle to ask instead about my past times. “I suppose I walk a lot, and I used to hunt and fish, back when there were animals, and, um, well, I read a lot.”

“You read?”

“I know, it may sound—”

“No, no. I love to read. I was hoping—I’d not managed to locate it yet—but I’m supposing there’s a library here somewhere?”

The smallest twitch of a smile escapes me. Not one large enough to be at all frightening, or so I hope. I can’t help it either way. “A library, you say? That I can help you with.”



Reading. *Reading!* She could not have said something better. If there was one thing I loved to do, it was reading. Mother taught me to read, back when she still had a voice and a reflection, and the fairies continued my education long after she went. I can barely remember not being a reader, not being able to peel back the pages of a book and slip away. Aside from the mirrors, it was the greatest escape I had, and books never stopped working. They were always there.

The library is also one of my favourite rooms in the castle. I love every inch of it; the tall bookcases, the smell of wood and paper, the red walls, the blue painted ceiling, the enormous sculpted tree. The faint reminder of nature existing, even in a place like this.

I make sure to catch Rose's reaction as I fling open the doors. Her face breaks into wonder, and I know, in that moment, that she loves it just as much as I do.

"It's beautiful," she breathes, her eyes sparkling.

I try not to smile at her as she gazes around at the little balconies and spiral staircases, the books in every colour imaginable, stacked fifty feet high. She is clearly enraptured. "Do you like it?"

"It's perfect," she exhales. "Thank you."

I have never met someone with such a reaction, never met anyone whose love of books clearly rivalled my own in a single glance. "I shall leave you then," I announce. "Enjoy your reading."

I do not want to leave, but I think she will enjoy some solitude, a moment or two for herself. I do not get very far before she speaks again.

"How many have you read?"

Her question beats against my chest, not just because I always, *always* love being asked questions about books, but because she has asked it. She has stopped me from leaving. That is not the action of someone who is afraid, or someone who despises me.

I answer her quietly, almost too scared to grasp at the question, at the chance of friendship, lest it be snatched away by a breeze. "Almost every



book here.”

“Almost every single one?” she sounds incredulous.

“Well, some of them were very dull—”

“That’s so many!”

“I didn’t have much else to do.”

That stops the conversation for a little while. I wonder what she feels, at this confession. Guilt? Sympathy? Her face is inaccessible.

“Well, which one is your favourite?” she asks.

“My favourite?” I have never been asked before, although I know the answer myself. There are many I enjoy, many I love, but one I keep returning to, time and time again. I discovered it one summer years ago, reading the entire thing in a single sitting beside the lake. I felt like years had passed by the time I emerged, not because the book was too long, but because I felt every agonising year the characters in the book experienced alongside them. “This one,” I say eventually. I turn to a shelf beside the fire, right at the bottom, pull out a tome. *Tromeo and Lessida*. It is the story of two very different people, from very different worlds, who come to understand—and love—each other in a way that no others can. Their lives take them in very different directions, but I was always so enthralled by the affection that they held for one another. It was also beautifully written, poetry crafted into prose.

Rose looks a little surprised by this revelation. Her face crinkles into a frown. “*Tromeo and Lessida*? It’s a love story!”

“What of it?” I am not sure I like her disbelief. Why should it not be my favourite?

“I just... I never really thought—”

“A curious choice for a monster, I suppose?”

“A curious choice for a *man*.”

A silence passes between us. It is not an uncomfortable one, but strange and new. Her face is so serious, so utterly bemused by the idea that I—a man—could enjoy such a tale. It’s like she’s forgotten I’m a monster at all. It’s so funny, that I break out into laughter.

Rose stares at me like I’m insane. I stop immediately. I’ve been told my laugh can be very alarming. “Sorry,” I say quickly, straightening my clothes. “Where would you like to begin?”

Rose points to one of the busts on a nearby desk. It is of a strange, warty little gnome with pointy ears. “I cannot help but notice,” she starts, “that

the past occupants of this castle... don't appear fully human?"

"That is correct."

"What were they?"

"They are what is commonly referred to as the Fey."

"What's that?"

"A group of conscious, highly intelligent, long-living beings, including but not limited to fairies, sprites, brownies, elves, pixies, dwarves, goblins, gnomes—"

"Those all exist?"

"You don't sound too surprised."

"Well... I do live in an enchanted castle inhabited by a talking self-proclaimed beast."

"Touché." I glance around the room. "I could find you a book on them, if you like?"

"Oh, yes please." Her voice is very light, almost giddy.

I spring onto a nearby bookshelf and race towards the ceiling. This is my domain, my playground. I know it better than I know myself. Each volume is a memory.

I pull one out, looking down at Rose. "Can you catch?"

"Yes, but—"

I hurl one down towards her and leap to the next shelf. There is another here on pixies. "Look out!"

I skim through the next shelf, firing down anything I think she might enjoy.

"You'll break the shelves!" she calls up. "Or the books!"

She clearly does not know me and this library. There is a faint, blossoming hope that she will one day, that if we already have this in common, something can grow from it.

I cease my search for a second to stare down at her. "Nonsense," I assure her. "I've been climbing these shelves for years. And I'm very careful with the books." I wouldn't harm them. I'm aware of how pathetic it sounds, but they are the closest things I have to friends. I wonder how Rose feels about them? I didn't ask, I was so desperate to please her by finding something she liked. I should ask her why she reads. To escape, to immerse, to entertain? I throw another book over my shoulder, pondering the thought.

I hear Rose cry out.

Oh, oh no...

I turn around. Rose is clutching her forehead, books scattered around her feet. I drop down so hard that the floor seems to rattle. One of Rose's eyes is closed, the other blinking out tears.

"Oh my... are you all right?" I gush. "I'm so sorry, I didn't look before I... I'm sorry—"

Why didn't I look? How hard would it have been? What have I done? Idiot, idiot, idiot...

"No, no, I'm all right," she insists, taking her hand off briefly. "I'm not bleeding, just a bruise—"

"I can get you something—"

"I'm fine!"

I pay no attention to her. There is no way I can stand there and watch her in pain, knowing I caused it. Never mind that it's just a bruise. It could have been worse. The wounds I inflicted on the fairies, my guardians, my friends... they were so much worse.

I storm up to the roof terrace and gather a cup of the waters there, before heading to the infirmary for a cloth. I try to measure my breathing, control my fury. Nothing works. When I get back to the library, I almost want to slam the cup down on the desk and storm off again. Or throw myself against a wall. Over the top, perhaps, but it's how I feel.

Instead, I set the cup down on the table, carefully as I can, and jump back. I don't want to hurt her again. "I really am very so—"

"You say sorry too much," she snips, taking up the cloth.

"Keep it on for a few moments."

"Sounds like good advice."

I shift back and forth on my paws for a minute, and then my eyes settle on the pile of books she has stacked up.

"I'll take these to your room." I try to make it sound like an offer, but it feels more like a demand.

"You don't have to—"

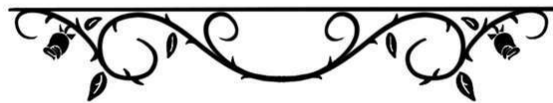
"It's fine."

I sweep them into my arms, and then sweep out of the room.

# 5



## ROSE



*“Don’t be afraid, Rose. Don’t be frightened.”*

Down the corridor, an infant is mewling. Finally, finally the baby is here! I dash away from Freedom’s side and run to Mama’s room. I see the baby. He is wrapped up in Nanny’s arms, but Nanny isn’t smiling and laughing like she was when Hope was born. Her face is stark white.

The rest of the room is stained with blood. There’s blood on Papa, blood on the baby, blood on the chewed-up sheets. The midwife hovers at Mama’s feet, which look limp and lifeless, but Mama’s hands stretch out towards me.

“Don’t be afraid, Rose. Don’t be frightened. Be brave, my dearheart. Be brave.”

The door closes in my face.

That is the last time I ever see my mother alive.

A scream rips through the air. I awake clutching my sheets, my face wet with tears. I breathe, steadying myself, and try to focus on the ticking clock.

“I am not afraid,” I repeat to myself. “Not afraid!”

There is the clattering of claws on marble, a brief moment of silence apart from my ragged breathing, and then a quiet knock at the door.

“Rose?”

My name sounds so strange coming from his lips, that I almost forget it is mine entirely.

“Yes?” I answer faintly.

“I was just... walking by and I heard... Are you all right?”

It takes me a moment to answer. “Yes,” I reply. “It was... just a nightmare.” A memory.

“If you need anything—”

“I’m fine!” What does he even suppose he could do? The castle appears to be attending to my whims. What else could he offer me?

There is silence on the other side of the door. “As you wish,” he says with the tiny, traceable sound of a sigh. He shuffles off, his claws scratching the marble far away.

My bedsheets are hot and clammy, but a creeping cold slithers up my spine. I wrap a blanket around my shoulders and go to pour a cup of tea. The pot is usually always filled with piping hot liquid, but tonight I find it flavourless and tepid. I gulp down a few mouthfuls and sit in the window seat. Frost is gnawing at the pane.

\*

Nightmares plague me into the morning hours. No awful memories this time, but visions of pale faces in mirrors, screaming in the hallways, and a voice telling me to run. When I finally wake, my eyes feel pasted shut. It is close to lunch time. In an attempt to energise myself, I make half an effort dressing for the day and head down to the dining room. Somebody has been polishing the silver, but it does little to elevate the gloom. I eat quickly, and head back to my chamber.

Perhaps it is the addition of the books by my bedside, but I am suddenly wary of how the room isn’t much to my taste. I decide to make good on the Beast’s promise that I am to treat the place like my own, and immediately rummage around the other rooms on my floor for paintings more to my liking. I borrow cushions to furnish the bed and chairs, roll up the gaudy rug and swap it for an elegant weave, replacing the thick hangings over the bed with gossamer ones. I decide to take down the curtains and swap them as well, but before I do I become distracted with a beautiful dresser, which, despite its delicate composition, is surprisingly heavy. I can barely move it.

“A little help would be nice!” I call out to no one in particular.

The dresser shifts forward suddenly. I shriek and topple backwards. There is a flicker of something around it, like the embers of a fire.

“Um, thanks?”

Nothing else happens. I get up, brush the dust off my clothes, and try to pull it again. It is a little better, but not much.

“Do you require some assistance?”

I leap several feet into the air. The Beast is standing behind me.

“You must stop doing that!”

“I’m sorry!” He scuttles back into the corner like a wounded dog. “I heard you moving around and thought—”

“No, it’s fine, I do need some help, actually...” Slowly, my breathing returns to normal. “You can move really quietly.”

“I’ve been told,” he says, as if this is something to be ashamed of.

“Well, now that you’re here...” I point to the dresser. “Would you mind?”

He nods, striding towards it and lifting it easily into his arms. He looks far too pleased with himself. “Your room?”

“My room.”

We walk back to it in silence and swap over the pieces in similar fashion. He glances around at the changes. “Making this place your own, I see.”

“That is the intention.” I am glad he doesn't tell me that I am making it my home. This place is not my home; it never will be. The best I can hope for is a prettier cage. “Put the old dresser by the window, will you?”

“The window?”

“Yes.”

His brow furrows, but he follows my instructions. Once there, I use the dresser as a platform and clamber up on top of it, standing on tip-toe to take down the old curtains.

“Are you... do you want me to do that?” he asks.

“Alas, I think this calls for defter fingers...” I say, trying not to stare at his massive paws as I take off the first curtain and throw it down to him in a flurry of dust.

He sighs. “I suppose you are right. I am just concerned you might fall...”

“Then I fall. I shall not break.”

I take off the second one. “Could you pass me the ones on the bed?”

He does so. They are midnight blue with gold and silver embroidery, and remind me of starlight. I stand back to admire them and my heel slips off the dresser, but before I can scream or even fully realise that I am falling, two hard arms wrap around my back and cushion my landing.

“Are you all right?”

I tense up. His arms are like stone, and I can feel each one of his claws pressing into my back. I cannot quite untangle my feelings; am I afraid, or more embarrassed about falling?

“Fine,” I say shortly.

He does not let go, and suddenly I am gripped by discomfort. Fear, then. I am a little disappointed in myself. I swallow. “You can put me down now.”

“Right. Of course.”

Hastily—and incredibly gently—he slides me to my feet. He takes several steps back. How can I possibly be scared of something so awkward? Yet, all of a sudden, his towering height is all the more noticeable, his fangs more pronounced, and his black fur all the more dark. He stuffs his hands behind his back.

“The room is looking lovely,” he says quickly. “Are you done with the furniture?”

“Yes,” I say.

He nods, and lifts up the old dresser to take it away. I do not tell him I need it for the other window, and he does not seem to notice, or want to notice. He moves silently for the door, and I do not stop him.



I do not see him again at dinner time, so I eat another meal by myself and spend my evening sewing by the fire, not having the heart for reading. I wonder how he is spending his evening.

I feel guilty for tensing. I am certain that he sensed it, that he could see my discomfort, and I curse my instincts. Why did I do that? I should have asked him to help me finish. I should have shown him that I was not afraid

—

I think about going to find him now, but I do not know what I would say. Apologise? That would almost be worse, admitting to him that what he feared I felt was true. Perhaps I should just go and... suggest we spend some time together? Doing what? I do not know what he likes to do and I

do not know him well enough to ask. I have met precious few strangers in my life, and only one talking beast.

Finally, I give up on my current project and succumb to sleep. I have another awful dream, where someone is hissing at me to stay away. The shadows have eyes, sharp as steel, vicious as fangs. It's a relief to wake.

"Rose! Rose, wake up!"

Someone is knocking at my door. For a minute, I forget where I am. The voice sounds excited, gleeful, childlike. It must be Beau, desperate to show me something. I hope it's not a worm.

"Rose!"

"Coming..."

It's only when my feet hit the rug that it comes back. There's no Beau, no home. It's the Beast that's calling me.

But for the first time since I arrived here, the stab of disappointment quickly lessens. I pull on my dressing-gown and shuffle towards the door.

"You bellowed?"

The Beast's eyes suddenly go wide, and he turns around on his back paws so quickly that he actually skids. "You're—you're not dressed."

"It is seven-thirty in the morning. You woke me up."

"I—! I'm so terribly sorry. I didn't think to look at the time. I, um, apologise profusely—"

"Calm down. You can only see a spot of ankle. Honestly, you'd think I was naked."

"Sorry, I'm just not used to seeing a lady in her undergarments—"

"Well, you may have to get used to it if I am to be stuck here." We were a close family, both in terms of affection and space. We barely dressed up for the neighbours, let alone each other. How did this creature ever manage to undress me if he's so shocked by the slightest hint of skin? "Now, what's so urgent?"

"I wanted to show you..." His eyes drift round unconsciously. "I'm sorry, would you mind getting dressed?"

I groan, and close the door in his face. "Is that a no?"

"That's a 'give me a minute'." It doesn't take long to wriggle into my dress and pull on my boots. I don't trouble myself with brushing my hair.

"Ready," I say, reappearing in the hall.

"Excellent!" He makes a motion a bit like a jump. "This way!"



He tears off down the corridor, half on all fours. It appears, in his excitement, he's forgotten to act human. He skitters about like an excited puppy. "Come on!"

He reaches the end of the hallway and stops at a full length window, pulling at the curtains. Bright, white light pools across the floor.

"Look, look!"

At first, I wonder what he's pointing at. The gardens look just as colourless as ever. Then, suddenly, it becomes abundantly clear. The gardens are covered in a thick carpet of white.

"Snow," I say, barely masking my disappointment.

The Beast dances from one foot to another, his tail wagging. "Winter, Rose! Winter!"

"I can see that."

"Don't you know what this means?"

"No."

"We haven't had a season here for years. Years! And now you're here and—" He stops suddenly, looking like he's said something he shouldn't.

"And?"

"AND THERE'S SNOW."

"Great."

"I'm going out in it."

"I'm not."

He stops for a second and I expect to see big, hurt, puppy-dog eyes. Instead, he simply shrugs. "Suit yourself," he says, and whizzes off.



I eat my breakfast alone and then head upstairs to read in the window seat. For some reason, I find myself feeling annoyed at the Beast for racing off and leaving me here. I know this is bitterly unfair of me, since I spent several days pretending he didn't exist, so then I grow angry at my own sense of injustice.

I don't know why I'm annoyed. I like solitude. Although, I'm learning there's a difference between being alone and being lonely. I like being

alone, having space to myself, time to think, room to sit however I like, be utterly me. But other people have never been far away, rarely out of earshot, and I was usually accompanied by an animal of some sort no matter where I was.

I have two dogs at home, Fifine and Azor, both large spaniels. Azor is mostly Freed's dog now—his stalwart hunting companion, brave and true, loyal to a fault. Fifine was my Mama's favourite, and after she died, Fifine seemed to redirect her lost love to her remaining babies, especially Beau. She refused to sleep downstairs in the kitchen. For almost all of Beau's infancy, she slept beside his cradle. It was only once he started to walk that she would sometimes sleep in our room. She was the sweetest, most gentlest of creatures.

Why am I speaking of her in the past tense? Fifine still *is* sweet and gentle... she's just not here.

I turn my gaze to the outside. I can just about see the Beast, frolicking in the snow just like one of the dogs, a black speck amongst the white. I can imagine him with his tongue hanging out. "Beast" is such a silly name for him. He has no more fang or claw than a puppy.

"Oh, all right," I say to no one in particular, and reach over to grab my boots.



I certainly haven't missed the cold, although the crisp white snow is surprisingly pleasant. There wasn't a drop of virgin snow left in the village. I pull on my gloves as I walk, hugging my hood close to my head. The Beast doesn't look up when I arrive. He appears to be trying to pile up the snow.

"Hello!" he says. "I'm building a snowman!"

I stare sceptically at the pile. "Do you even know what a man looks like?"

The Beast stops. "I've seen pictures."

Sighing, I kneel beside the pathetic attempt and try to shape the base. "Roll a large snowball," I instruct.

“A ball?”

“Yes.”

It takes a little while, but eventually, our man begins to take shape. The Beast struggles with the defter jobs, so he rolls up the snow and I pat it into place. Finding branches for the arms is simple enough—he snaps them off a nearby tree with astonishing ease—and I dig into the path to find stones for the buttons and eyes. Coal would be best, but I haven’t seen any here.

“This doesn’t look like a man,” says the Beast.

“It looks like a snowman. What were you trying to make, a marble sculpture?”

“Something like that,” he admits, a little forlornly.

I untie my scarf and loop it around the snowman’s neck.

“No,” says the Beast, unravelling it and handing it back, “use mine.”

“Won’t you get cold?”

He fixes me with a quizzical look. “I’m covered in fur.”

“Then why wear a scarf in the first place?”

“Because that’s what people do when they go out in the cold.”

“But...” I almost say you’re not people but, while true, that’s not what I mean. “Why do you care what people do?”

“It has come to my attention that most people care what other people do.”

“You’re not most people.”

He cocks his head thoughtfully. “Apparently, neither are you.”

I’m not sure why he thinks this after only a few days, but I almost find myself smiling. He’s the first person to say it without any kind of disdain. “Rose is very... *different*.” People would say to Nanny, usually when complimenting my siblings. They didn’t mean it in a nice way. They meant strange. Not like us. I didn’t much care for their opinion, but it is never nice to know you don’t belong.

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

“You don’t like what other people like,” he says. “You don’t seem concerned about fitting in.”

“Actually, that’s not entirely true. It’s nice to fit in. I just don’t think it’s worth being someone else to do it. If you have to pretend to be somebody else to feel like you belong... you don’t really.”

“Where did you read that?”

“That one I learned myself.” It’s getting close to lunch time. My stomach rumbles. “Will you eat with me?”

At first, he looks like he’s going to refuse. He opens his mouth, splutters a few sounds, and then swallows them. He nods, and we walk back to the castle together.

“Have you got a mate back home?” he asks, quite out of the blue.

Now it is my turn to splutter. “I’m sorry?”

“You know, a sweetheart, a lover. The last visitor here had a fiancé... I felt exceptionally bad about that.”

My heart stills a little. He just wants to know who is missing me. “I have a Papa, a Nanny, two brothers, and two sisters,” I tell him. “No young gentleman callers. Not unless...”

He raises a large, bushy eyebrow.

“Well...” My mind turns to James. I haven’t told anyone yet, not even Honour, but a few weeks ago, at the Mayor’s party, I kissed him.

He found me reading in a little nook in the hallway. I hadn’t meant to be rude; I just scuttled away for a few moments of quiet, when I’d found a stray book lying on a chaise. I hadn’t been able to resist. James found me after a few minutes, sat down beside me, and asked what was going on in the story. James had never minded my curious reading habits. He was always very polite about it, asking me what was happening, what I liked about the book, etc. But I could always tell his questions were a little forced. He was just being kind. James was not exactly a wordy person, really, lovely though he was.

*Is.*

Anyway, James had found me there just as I was getting to a good bit. A romance scene. I had probably had a bit too much wine that night, and I suddenly found myself desperately wanting to know what it was like to be kissed.

So I kissed him.

It was very nice. Gentle. Brief. Warm. But there wasn’t anything special about it. It was not the kiss that the hero and heroine of the story were about to experience.

I had asked Mama, many years ago, if the kinds of kisses in books actually existed. “You know, the earth-changing, magical, firework-causing kind.”

Mama smiled at me warmly, and stroked my hair. “Only if you kiss the right person, at the right moment.”

My kiss with James was not like that.

“I kissed a friend of mine a few weeks ago,” I tell the Beast, “but he isn’t my sweetheart.”

“Oh.” He stops walking for a moment, and then quickly catches up. “Not a good kiss?”

“Not enough fireworks,” I conclude, and then smiling, I run on ahead.



The evening passes more quickly than any of my others. The Beast eats both lunch and dinner with me, gnawing as carefully as he can manage at a chicken bone and trying to take smallish mouthfuls. I find the sight almost comical.

Since arriving at the castle, I’ve had a lot of plain meals, never much in the mood for anything else. Tonight, I pray for something different, and am rewarded with a strange, softly-spiced lamb stew. There is some kind of tangy, orange fruit in it that I have never tasted before. It’s sweet and tender.

After dinner, we retire to the library. I discover an old favourite of mine, about a young noble girl who gets shipwrecked on a desert island with no one but a resourceful cabin boy for company. She has to fend off pirates and monsters, overcome her own prejudices, befriend the natives, and, naturally, falls in love with the cabin boy. Unfortunately, just as they’re about to confess their love, they are ‘rescued’ by her uncle and realise that the world they come from won’t allow them to be together.

I’ve just reached the part where Evelyn has her first run-in with the pirates and manages to fell one of them with a frying pan before being rescued by Jean, when the clock chimes ten. It is getting late. We say our goodbyes and go to bed.

Tonight is the first night I cannot hear the clock ticking, and I fall into a soft and dreamless sleep.



For the next few days, we exist in a similar fashion. Each morning, we meet in the dining hall, breakfast, play in the grounds, lunch, and usually retire to the library for the afternoon. We only spend a few hours apart each day. He offers me a tour of the castle, but I prefer to wander on my own. Although he tells me he has spent his whole life here, he does not seem to know much about the place—or know much he can tell me.

It takes a good two days to visit most of the rooms in the castle—except the one forbidden to me, of course, and the Beast’s—but even then I am sure I’ve missed a few. There is an endless supply of hallways, corridors, stairs, chambers, suites, turrets, balconies and battlements. There is such an eclectic style too. Although most of the castle has a fey kind of wildness to it, there are traditionally gaudy chambers, pieces of gilded furniture, rooms draped in patterned wallpaper with an overabundance of faux flowers and gold chandeliers. It is as if someone has picked up different parts of history and blended them together.

There is little in the castle that reveals its history to me. The rooms look as if everyone simply got up one morning and swept off without a word. The beds are made, but there are clothes in the closets, books on side-tables, the occasional hairbrush on a dresser.

Somebody, or something, is cleaning them. Layers of dust are slowly being pulled away, the screens of cobwebs disappearing. Little by little, the place is brightening. While the library remains my favourite place, on the ground floor there is a delightful round chamber housing every kind of instrument imaginable. I try the harp and the piano—always my favourites—and determine I am definitely in need of practice. I add it to my list of things to do, and think of taking up the violin as well. The room next to it is a far more sorry sight—an empty menagerie, full only of beautiful, empty cages, perches and tanks, now devoid of any occupants.

I have not seen a single living thing here, other than... him. Occasionally, I think I see the flicker of an insect in the corner of my eye, but it always turns out to be nothing, except, perhaps, the magic of the

castle made visible, for one, ephemeral second. On the third floor, I discover a glorious bathroom, with a pool so deep I can swim in it, and the tallest turret has glass walls, so you can see all around you. There's a chamber full of only mirrors, and endless galleries of endless portraits. My personal favourite, next to the library, is a little roof garden, accessible only by a narrow, winding staircase. There is little there, of course—bare pots, little statuettes, a bench—but I can see what it must have been like, before. The thorns of the rose bushes remain, tumbling over the walls and roofs. It must have been magnificent in summer. There is a small fountain there too, still trickling away, and the bottom of the pool is painted gold, casting a soft glow across the stones.

I am starting to see a beauty in this place. It is a pretty pen I have found myself.

# 6



I am not sure how I feel about the story Rose told me, about her friend that she kissed at the Mayor's winter party. It is no business of mine what she does, or has done, I only asked because...

Because I wanted to know if she had anyone back home, holding her affections. I wanted to know if there was anything, a sliver of affection, that she could possibly bestow on me.

I wanted to know if it was all right for me to like her.

Do I like her? It seems early in the day to form any kind of attachment, but it's easy enough to say I enjoy her company.

I could like her. I could like her quite easily. Love is another matter.

I shelved the thought, but my chest was still tight with it hours after. Rose chatted politely throughout lunch before going back to her rooms, after exacting a promise from me to have dinner with her later.

When dinner time came, the room was cleaner than ever, and laid out only for the two of us. Rose appeared in a gown of crushed red. In the light of the fire, she looked like a flame, burning steadily into the night. We retired to the library afterwards, and she picked up a book and slid to the rug beside the hearth.

She flicked her gaze towards me. "Have you read this one?"

I scanned the title. "A long time ago," I tell her. "I don't remember it that much."

"It's an old favourite," she said, cracking it open.



“Oh?”

I waited for her to say more, but she was gone, lost between the pages of a book, to surface only when the story was over. I wanted to peel her out of there. I wanted to ask her why she’s so enraptured, to have her share that world with me.

But I was also certain she’d bite my head off if I did, and was forced to wait until she emerged.

We read in silence until the clock chimed ten, and she jolted out of the book.

“It’s late,” she rushed. “I should retire to bed.” She got up, her face golden in the firelight. She brushed down her clothes. “Goodnight, then,” she said, as if waiting for me to say something else.

The smallest of smiles slipped past me. “Goodnight, Rose.”



Days go by in this fashion. We meet every morning in the dining hall, breakfast, play in the grounds, lunch, and usually retire to the library for the afternoon. Although Rose likes to explore on her own sometimes, we are rarely alone for long.

I am eager for her company, and increasingly glad for the evenings which we pass beside the fire, losing ourselves to literature. She is not the first to enjoy reading. It was the only thing Penelope and I ever spoke about. Felicity loved books about travel. Grace too, enjoyed a cosy romance.

But Rose doesn’t just read, she vanishes. The rest of the world melts away for her whenever she’s sucked in. I remember exactly where I was when I first read a book, like I was meeting a fascinating stranger. I wonder if Rose is a bit like that too, aware that books are far more than paper and ink.

I’m glad she arrived only a couple of days after the last full moon, that I have another two weeks of reading beside her, long into the night, before I need to make my leave, else risk her knowing just how much of a monster I can be.



One morning, I wake and see that the lake has finally frozen over, and am struck by a sudden idea. I raid one of the rooms searching for a pair of skates, finally finding something that looks like they might be the right size. I hurry along and offer them to Rose.

“Here,” I say, brandishing them in her face, “I found these for you. They should be about your size.”

“What about you?” she asks.

“Oh, I really don’t think they’ll fit.”

She snorts at this. It is such a funny, ridiculous sound. Her whole face splutters into laughter. It is the first time I have seen her so at ease, so herself. Even a little happy.

I cannot help but smile back, even though I know my smile can be very frightening. For a brief, fraction of second, I imagine she is returning my smile, but then it drops suddenly and I know it was just wishful thinking.

“Sorry,” she says.

“By all means, laugh.” I chew my lip. I think she might have been embarrassed, which seems silly to me. She looked very... sweet, I think, is the best word. Certainly, there is nothing to be ashamed of, especially with me as an audience.

She narrows her eyes. “What?”

“Who would have thought,” I try not to laugh, “that such a little snort could sound so sweet.”

“I do not snort!” she stamps her foot in objection. “Pigs snort, ladies—”

“Oh, that was a snort, but don’t worry, it was a very ladylike one.”

“My nanny would be so pleased... and I don’t snort!”

“Do.”

“Don’t.”

She then does something that no one has ever done to me before, a gesture that I have only ever seen in my watching of the mirror. She punches me in the arm, which probably hurts her a lot more than it does me. She might as well be a feather.

In my watching of the world outside, this was a thing done between friends and siblings. It is a childish action, one borne out of familiarity. It is not supposed to hurt, I gather. It is almost affectionate.

No one has ever done it to me. No one has ever dared.

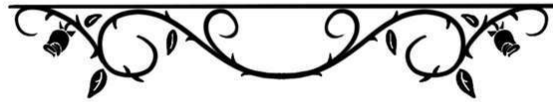
“Sorry,” she says quickly, “I shouldn’t have punched you. That was mean.”

“No,” I respond slowly, “that’s not it... it’s not like you can hurt me.”

She plucks the skates from my hands. Her fingers brush my paw fearlessly. “Shall we?”



# ROSE



I have never skated before. In the village, there was no flat water large enough to skate on, not even in the harshest of winters. I touch the surface tentatively. It does not move. Beast, meanwhile, moves straight past me and glides onto the frozen lake with clumsy grace.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” I ask gingerly. I have always had a fear of deep water, but this looks as solid as stone. It is difficult to imagine it is anything else, that anything lurks beneath the surface. He stops spinning around for a second to answer me.

“Mostly,” he says, beaming. “Don’t worry, if you fall in, I’ll drag you out.”

“What if you fall in?”

“Then it’s going to be a very lonely one-hundred-and-seventy days for you.”

“That’s not funny.”

“You’re right. Whoever shall make you laugh if I’m not here to amuse you?”

“Still not funny.”

Laughing, he slides back out, moving from four feet to two with ease.

One-hundred-and-seventy days. He is counting, and not for the same reason I am. He is counting, because, after those days, he is going to be alone again.

Not for the first time, I find that feeling of sympathy surging inside me. But it's more than that, this time. I do not want him to be alone. It feels so much more unfair than it did a few days ago, the little puddle of sympathy swelling into a pond.

I look out at the vast, frozen lake in front of me. Will it be this large by day one-hundred-and-seventy? I pray for it to freeze inside me. I don't want to feel it anymore.

"Rose? Are you coming?"

I watch him twirling about. I suppose if it can take his weight, it can take mine. I slide both feet onto the ice. They split in different directions and I skid to my knees with a shriek. He tries not to laugh as he glides back over.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, fine..." I try to pull myself up, but it's difficult on the ice. Beast is holding out a hand, but timidly, as if he isn't sure he should offer it.

I remember how I tensed before when he caught me, and am determined never to do so again. I take his hand and haul myself up, grabbing hold of both of his arms to steady myself. He is solid and incredibly sturdy, more an oak in the ground, not an animal on ice. I realise he has filed down the frightening talons he brandished before.

"All right?" he asks again.

"Better."

"I'd give you some instruction, but I'm unfamiliar with skates."

"It's fine. I'm sure I'll get the hang of it."

For the better part of an hour, I experiment with my footwork, staying close to the banks so I can fall into the soft snow if I feel unsteady. Which I do, a lot. He hovers nearby to begin with, trying to catch me when I topple over. I make a bit of a game of it, sliding some distance and then launching into the bank when I feel a fall coming on.

Slowly, I get the hang of it. I begin to get more adventurous, drifting away from the bank. I am loath to go too far out. It feels safer to be nearer the solid ground—probably a good rule for a long life. He, of course, is having a whale of a time. He's picked up a good rhythm and is smoothly

gliding around, one foot at a time, hands behind his back. He looks back at me often (to check that I'm all right, I think) and then promptly performs some kind of trick.

*Show-off.*

I try to build up some momentum, kicking my skates quickly against the surface, and sail forward several feet. The wind rushes through me, sending a quiet, pleasant chill right down to my toes. I feel light, giddy, as if I've taken flight.

Naturally, I quickly lose my footing, tumbling to the ground. I sigh, rolling over onto my back with my hair splayed out behind me, like a frost-covered cape. I trace the lines in the ice with my fingers. I had forgotten the way ice could glitter. The water rolls across the other side of the surface, brushing the ice like clouds. For a second, I think I see a flash of something silver glimmering along the pebbles. A fish? No, there are no fish in this lake.

But there was something there, I am sure of it.

I sit up, scrubbing the ice with my sleeve. There it is again—a dark, grey shape, slithering under the ice. I tap the surface, trying to see if it responds. Is it alive or not? I don't see it again.

Instead, I feel a shudder, the awful feeling of something moving underneath me. I hear a crack.

My breath stills in my throat, my heart pummelling against my chest. Sound is swiftly sucked away. I can feel the ice shifting. It is as if I am watching a spider crawl slowly up my body. I am paralysed, but I feel every trembling movement.

The cracks widen. I can't move, can't speak, can't scream—

“Rose!”

With one final, desperate look back at the Beast, I plunge into the ice.



Ice burns through my lungs, spreading to the tips of my fingers like wildfire. Cold iron grips my neck. Sharp pain ignites across my skin. I

struggle, but my limbs are heavy. I want to fight. Fight against the dark and the cold, but the pain in my chest is absolute. I am being torn apart.

There is something reaching for me. Someone reaching in the murk. Not to save me, to hurt me. Talons fasten around my ankles. I am being pulled down into the dark, the dark I can't see, can't fathom. The urge to scream rises, but the water presses against me.

I see a terrible face, burning into the back of my eyelids. A pale, narrow, starved face, surrounded by masses of dark, swirling hair. It ought to be human, but for two long horns protruding from its skull. It is grinning at me, laughing maniacally.

*No, no, no. You can't have me. I am not yours, not yours.*

I kick against it. Lash out. Move. Struggle. Fight. Not giving up. Not yet...

I see something else. Something beautiful, white and gold, moving towards me. A hand reaches out. I hear words, like music, telling me to hold on.

Somebody is calling my name. I feel something grip my middle, and then blackness swallows me whole.



I skid towards the hole on my belly, my arm reaching into the water. It burns my skin, tearing under my fur. It must be agony for her.

*Rose, Rose, Rose!*

I might be screaming her name, I can't be sure. I can barely see her, the waters turning her red cloak blood-black.

*No, no, NO!*

I fall into the water, the ice stinging my eyes, smashing against my chest like a blade. It makes me want to draw a breath, but I fight against the instinct, clawing my way through the water towards her.

That's when I see her.

Another face. A pale, starved one, half like Mother's and half more like a monster's than my own. Dark hair, two horns. Glistening dark eyes.

*Moya.*

It cannot be. She is dead. She must be.

I blink, and she is gone. A figment of my imagination, a vision of the cold. A nightmare roused to frighten me, even when other fears are far more pressing.

My arms wrap around Rose's waist. I haul us upwards, out of the water. She's trembling, her eyes darting under closed lids. She is as small and breakable as a piece of glass in my large, monstrous arms. Her face is blue; she is ice cold.



I call her name, but she does not answer, does not do anything as I race back to the castle. I drop her in the bathtub. Immediately, the taps start spouting out hot water. Steam rises, the grate flickers into life. I paw at her clothes, which break away from her skin, but I cannot remove them. I don't dare to try—I would only hurt her. I scream instead for Ariel, Ophelia, Margaret. They are still here, just about. The bath and the fire are proof of that. Even if I cannot see them, they must be here.

Rose's clothes start to fall away, tossed towards the side of the room by invisible hands. I turn my eyes away, make a bed by the fireside, sweep a blanket from the mattress and fling it over her still form. Her eyes move, just a little, and for a second I think she opens them. She murmurs something under her breath.

I long for a voice, anyone's, telling me she will be all right. Some relief, reassurance, understanding.

Instead, I can only stand numbly as I watch her in the water, afraid to reach out.

Eventually, I have to. The steam dissipates. I have to lift her from the tub, placing her down by the fire, patting her dry. She is warm now, and looks almost peaceful.

I hover by her side for quite some time, afraid to leave her. I try to imagine what the others would say, if they were here. Will the blankets and fire be enough?

*Hold her*, Ariel would say. It is so clear, I can almost hear her. I admit that it would make sense, but I have already touched her so many times today, and only once with her permission.

She held my hand. Grabbed it to pull herself up. No fear, no hesitation.

I think she would understand that I am doing this to help her.

As carefully as I can, I lower myself to the floor, and put an arm around her. She moves slightly under the weight. It has been years since I have been so close to another person, and never for this long. Grace used to wrap me in fierce hugs, briefly and quickly. She even kissed me on the cheek, once or twice.

Rose reminds me a little of her. She has a similar fearlessness, and I even imagine they look a little similar, although that is probably just because they both look at me in the same way, as if they do not care that I am a monster. As if they don't even see it. Only the fairies, and my mother, have ever looked at me like that.

But there is little else of Grace in her. Grace was kinder, sweeter, nicer. That is not to say that Rose is unkind—certainly, in these last couple of days, she has been much softer to me—but sweetness rose out of Grace like a flower. Sometimes, I think I might have come to love her, if she could have loved me, if circumstances had been different. Other times, I am quite sure that nothing would have ever bloomed between us. She was lovely, but we were different souls.

I do not know Rose well enough yet to know if she is the one, the one I have been waiting for.

I do know I need her to wake up.



I hold her in my arms, waiting for her to wake, to rejoin me. Her heart is beating, she is warm and dry and breathing, but I feel like I cannot move until she is awake again.

Hours pass until I hear her murmur something softly, and suddenly she bolts upright, screaming. I leap away from her, scampering to the side of the room.

“A face, a face!” she blubbers. “A horrible, monstrous face! It was here—in the mirror and—”

My insides twist. I can only imagine what it must be like to wake up next to a face like mine. Fearless as she pretends to be, she is still only human. “It’s all right, Rose,” I tell her, as calmly as I can manage, it’s not her fault I look like this. “I won’t hurt you.”

Rose blinks at me, as though I’ve just said something incredibly foolish. “Of course you won’t,” she says. Her words hang there for a moment, and then her cheeks go bright red. “Oh, oh no, I didn’t mean—”

I rise to my feet, turning towards the door. “It’s all right, I understand —”

“No, you don’t. I’m not talking about you. I saw something in the mirror, and... and in the lake. A person, or the face of one...”

I freeze. No, no, it cannot be. I had assumed that Moya was just a vision I’d conjured, nothing real. But if Rose saw her too...

What did that mean? I had not felt a stirring of her presence in years. She had never appeared to the other guests. Why this one? Why now?

I think about telling Rose the truth. Who she is. I could do that without explaining what I am, what she made me. But if I tell her, it may be the last time she's unafraid. She'll jump at every shadow she sees.

She's been through enough as it is. I don't want to worry her. Not now.

*Coward*, says another voice.

"You've gone through a shock," I say quickly. "And the isolation plays tricks on us all. You must have imagined it. There is no one else here but us." I hate myself for saying them, and the lies taste bitter on my tongue.

But Rose softens almost immediately, making me feel worse. She trusts me.

"Are you sure?"

"I wish I wasn't." At least, I wish the fairies were here.

Rose swallows, trembling. Her eyes glaze, and she starts to spiral. I leap to her side, sliding an arm behind her. I hand her a cup of tea the fairies have made up.

"Drink this," I instruct.

"Thank you," she whispers, making me feel worse than ever.

"'Tis only a drink."

"I meant for saving me."

"Oh. Well, entirely selfish of me, I assure you. Wasn't quite ready to give up the pleasure of your company."

"Pleasure? I've been beastly to you... if you'll pardon the pun."

I chuckle, the tightness in my chest loosening. "You've been lovely these past couple of days, and I cannot blame you for any initial frostiness."

"I'm sorry you thought I was talking about your face."

"It's all right. I'm used to it by now."

"That makes it worse!"

"Does it?"

"Yes!" she insists. "No one should have to get used to people being cruel to them."

I drop my head. "Perhaps I felt I deserved it."

"Did you? Deserve it?"

"Are you asking if I committed some sort of crime to be left here, guarding this place?"

Rose nods solemnly.

“None that comes to mind. No, being here is not my punishment.” *It was my mother’s.*

Rose frowns. “Then why would you think you deserved it?”

I stare at my hands. Despite it all, despite knowing that I had no choice, a part of me has always wondered if maybe I deserved it for the things that came later, the moments when I couldn’t control my strength. The lies I told. “For being like this,” I sigh, “a monster.”

I am still staring at my palms when Rose slips her hand into mine. I can barely feel the pressure of it, or the warmth of her skin, but the touch sends shivers down me.

As do her words.

“I see no monster here,” she says. “But then you did just save my life, so I may be riding that thought for a couple of days at least.”

A twitch of a smile rises to my cheeks. Unavoidable. “Perhaps I’ll ask you again then when you’ve fully recovered.”

“Perhaps.” She lies herself back down in the furs, turning her face towards the firelight. “The other people that came here before me. Were they... what were they like?”

I have been dreading this question, the nakedness of the admission, but at the same time, I am glad that she has asked. That she cares enough to.

“They were... apprehensive, at first. You can hardly blame them. Some... some were very afraid. One girl barely came out of her room the entire time she was here. They could be... could be hurtful, sometimes, but only because they didn’t know. But some were very kind. One or two, I would have called friends by the time they left. None...”

*None were like you. Bold and unafraid and strange and special and mysterious. None of them I wanted to know as much as I want to know you. I want to unravel you, I want you to unravel me.*

I have always hoped for someone to understand me, as well as love me. But Rose is changing things. It is not about me now, but her. I wish to know her, not in the hope of loving her, or her loving me, but just for her.

She moves a little closer, unconsciously, I think. “None what?” she asks.

I shake my head. There is nothing there that I can explain to her just yet. “It doesn’t matter,” I say. I must change the subject.

Thankfully, Rose does this herself. “Tell me a story.”

No one has ever asked such a thing of me. “What would you like to hear?”

“Something true and something magical.”

It strikes me that she’s probably never been able to request such a thing, and so I tell her a pared down version of the castle’s history. “Very well.” I clear my throat. “Long ago, the world of men was rampant with magic. Fairies of every kind used to roam the land, as common as cats. While some were kind and benevolent, many misused their power, and a few were as cruel as they were beautiful. Stories were spread about evil deeds, of bad deals, stolen children, curses... as if fairies were the only creatures capable of misdeeds. There was a great war, and both sides suffered terrible losses. The Queen of the Fairies decided that it was best for everyone if they withdrew from the world. She forged a new realm, one where the fairies could live in peace. But she did not wish to deny mankind their gifts altogether, and so a precious few were allowed to roam the world, only a few times a year. This arrangement seemed to suit; fairies were encouraged to be good, hoping to one day gain passage to Earth, and magic was only ever used for good purposes.

“But then a fairy with a dark heart grew envious, and few things spoil the soul faster than festering envy. She thought the Queen unfair for denying them the pleasures of the Earth, and thought mankind foolish and undeserving of such a beautiful, ever-changing land, for the price of paradise is boredom. And so, a second war began, and this time there was to be no victor. The evil fairy destroyed the Queen, but destroyed herself in the process. Slowly, eventually, the land of fairies faded into nothingness, until all that remained of their deeds—good and bad—were a few simple stories.”

Rose sighs dreamily. “Mama used to tell me a story just like that, almost word-for-word.”

If she is a descendant of the Fey that fled the castle when Moya first rose to power, it makes sense that such a story was passed down through the ages. But Rose’s confession brings another opening, a more important one.

“You must miss her.”

She nods. “She died when I was nine, giving birth to my little brother.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I refill her cup. “Tell... tell me about your family.”

“Why?”

“Because you must miss them, and talking about them might keep them close.”

So she tells me. She tells me about her nanny, their cook, caretaker, and grandmother-substitute, and her battles with their dogs and the mischief they got into. She tells me about her father. Wise, quiet and careful, who spends most of the day reading or gazing into the fire, his dog at his feet. She talks of her siblings, of her eldest brother Freedom, who constantly irritates her, who spends all of his days hunting but secretly paints in his “tool shed”.

“Freedom was with me when I crossed over the stream,” she says. I sense there is a little more to the story, but I don’t push it. “I actually wandered off from the party because I was mad with him. He must be furious.”

With her, or with himself, I wonder? I realise that this is the name she whispered when caught in the storm. She might say she doesn’t like him, but she misses him as much as the others.

She moves onto the rest of her siblings. She is closest to her older sister, Honour, who is beautiful, dependable, calm and loving, “the best older sister I could ask for.” She is due to get married soon. Rose is sad she’ll be missing it. She says nothing, but I feel it. Once upon a time, when the magic was rampant, time moved differently outside in the rest of the world. That is unlikely to be the case now, so I put off offering any false hope. She carries on to her younger sister.

“Hope is more of a recluse than I am, serious and quiet, far smarter than any of the rest of us, although not as wise as she would like to be. Yet.”

Beau is last, the child her mother died to bring into this world.

“He is brave and good-hearted and just wants everyone to be happy. He has a delicious, infectious laugh. The first time I smiled after Mama’s death was when he smiled at me.”

She pauses here in her story, her eyes misty. I think of how little she smiles, and wonder if her mother took part of that with her to the grave, and that it takes a lot now to raise the ghost of that smile to her cheeks.

And the greatest source of those rare smiles—her family—has been stolen from her.

“Rose?” I crouch down by her side, wishing I was allowed to hold her. I make my words an embrace. “Rose, you will see your family again, I

promise.”

“I know,” she says, and bites down on her lip, swallowing a thousand other fears. She will get them back, but they are not here when she needs them.

She starts to choke on her tears. I hand her a handkerchief, but it does little to stem the flood. She reaches forward and buries her face in my chest. Her hands coil into tight fists, and she vibrates with grief.

Grace cried a lot when she first came here, but no one, not ever, has turned to me for comfort of this kind. For a moment, I am utterly numb, incapable of movement. I have no idea what to do.

But she shows no signs of leaving, of pushing me away, so I circle my arms around her and hold her as she cries, wishing I could feel the softness of her hair between my fingers.

Eventually, the tears start to subside. She goes limp, sliding back towards the pillows, her eyes half-closed already. Her hand is still on my arm, but as I try to tug it away, her grip tightens. “Will you stay?” she whispers.

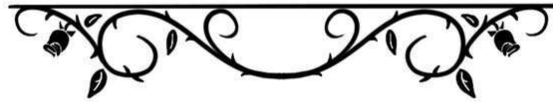
I look down at her, curled into the covers, her green eyes glassy and imploring. My heart skips a beat, and I realise that there is no chance of me ever leaving her.

I take a breath, trying to control the tremor in my voice. “For as long as you want me.”

# 9



## ROSE



No dreams disturb my slumber, and I awake to the faintest sunlight streaming across my cheek. My chest is still tight, a cold spreads through my face, but I feel lighter than the night before.

The Beast is slumped by the side of the room, but the minute my gaze settles on him, he leaps upright as if my gaze burns him.

“You’re awake,” he states numbly.

“You’re still here.”

“I’m sorry, do you wish me to go—”

“No, I just thought—”

“You asked me to stay—”

“I know, I just... have you been there all night?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he rushes. “I was perfectly comfortable.”

“On the floor?”

He looks down at his feet. “I usually sleep on the floor.”

He is ashamed of this, of anything, I realise, that suggests he is more animal than man. He is neither to me, and perhaps that is why it bothers him—the sense being betwixt and between, belonging nowhere.



“You should eat something,” he announces, before I can think of something to say in response. He brings over a tray of soup and bread.

I take up the bowl, my fingers shaking slightly. I hadn’t realised how hungry I was.

“Eat up!” he urges.

I stuff my face with broth-soaked bread and chew. “You sound like Honour.”

“Eat first, then talk.”

“Well excuse me, Mr Manners...” I swallow, warmth spreading through my body. Not for the first time, I wonder if there’s magic in the food, and not just in its ability to appear out of thin air. I take a few more mouthfuls greedily, hoping he will realise he doesn’t have to stand on ceremony whenever we eat together.

Satisfied at my efforts, he asks, “Honour is... your older sister, yes? Hope is your younger one?”

“Correct,” I say, gulping down tea.

“So Freedom, Honour, Hope and Beau? I’m noticing somewhat of a theme.”

I groan. “Mother’s virtuous names. It’s a family thing, apparently. I think Freedom got the worst of it.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to say.”

I giggle. “Mama thought she was having a girl, and she had her heart set on Liberty, because the war had just come to a close, but then Freedom was a boy, and so... sometimes I joke that she knew he was going to be a beast and was punishing him in advance.”

“What about Rose?”

“Story goes that on the day I was born, my father bought my mother a bouquet of roses. He said they were his favourite flower, and that they were *beauty personified*. He was trying to give her a hint. She was previously going to call me Beauty.”

He smiles. “It would have suited you.”

I pull a face. “It’s a ridiculous name and you know it.” My spoon falls to the bowl with a clatter, and my tray is cleared away. Beast fiddles about with stacking the crockery, as if reluctant to return to my side.

“What... what happened to your family?” I ask.

He pauses for a moment, stiffening. He takes a careful breath. “My father died before I was born,” he tells me slowly. “My mother... I

remember her. Vividly. But more... in the way one remembers a painting.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was... she left this world, when I was still very small.”

He is an orphan then, all alone in the world. Not a day goes by I don't miss Mama, but to have no one, no one at all...

“What’s your real name?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Your real name. You told me to call you Beast, but your mother couldn’t have called you that.”

“No,” he replies, “she did not. But it has been so long now I can barely remember it.”

It seems unlikely that he has forgotten his own name, but I sense I will not discover it. Perhaps it’s very long or embarrassing. Perhaps it doesn’t suit him at all. What name does, I wonder? My eyes wander over his dark, prickly body, searching for inspiration, but it is the painting of roses over his shoulder that offers it.

“Thorn,” I say suddenly.

“Come again?”

“I am going to call you Thorn.”

“Because... I’m a thorn in your side?” he asks sceptically.

I laugh. “No! It’s because... you’re a little prickly, but accompany every rose.”

He tilts his head, regarding me with some intense expression I can’t quite read. “I’d like that,” he says eventually, very softly. “Thorn.”



I remain in bed for the next two days, heaped under blankets and nursing a heavy cold. Thorn barely leaves my side the entire time. He entertains me by reading. He is the most animated speaker, doing accents and impressions. His company, I know, has been limited. Where did he learn how to speak like that? He breathes life into every word he reads. Worlds unfurl on his tongue.

When I'm in want of silence, he brings me my sewing and watches in amazement as I transform my bed into a dresser's shop, sniping and snitching dresses to my liking. I do insist he returns to his own room for the night, but he is back again at every sunrise with a new book for the day.

One evening, when I am left alone, I bring out a little notebook and count back the days. It has been two weeks now. Honour is getting married tomorrow. I wonder how she is, if she's going through with it without me, if anyone is staying up with her tonight. Throwing back the covers, I get out of bed and tip-toe over to the writing desk in the corner, taking out pen and parchment.

*Dear Honour,*

*Tomorrow is your wedding day, a day you have dreamed of all your life, and I will not be standing by your side for it. I am so sorry, dearest sister.*

*I know my sudden disappearance will have been hard for everyone, and I am truly sorry for all the pain I will have put you all through. I did not mean to go. Rest assured that I am well; I am safe and unhurt, and will return to you in time. I know it sounds impossible, but it appears the rumours of stepping over the stream were true: I have been stranded in a fairy realm, in a great abandoned castle. It was a little disconcerting at first, but I find myself warming up to it. It is a bit of a grey adventure, but an adventure nonetheless.*

*There does not seem to be much magic left in this place, but it does have miraculous food and a rather fetching bathtub. You would love the music room, and I am very enamoured with the library. Even Hope would struggle to run out of material here!*

*I also appear to have made a friend. I know, me, a friend! I suppose everyone has thought my quota of those filled for years? I thought so too. He is as much a prisoner here as I am—more so, perhaps, for he has never left—and there is a loneliness inside him that he hides as well as I hid mine. We share a love of literature, although not always of the same tastes, and he makes me laugh. You know precious few have managed to do that.*

*I want you to know that although I miss you all terribly, I'm not miserable here. At times I am almost happy, although I cannot be truly content while I know that you all will be worrying after me. Please let everyone know that I am all right and will be home within a few months.*

*Tell Hope to watch my garden for me, and please read Beau his favourite bedtime story in my absence. Do the voices. He likes those.*

*I know you will look beautiful tomorrow, and I know that Charles will treat you with every bit of the admiration you deserve. I just wish I could be there to see the look on his face when he sees you in your gown. The two of you almost make me long for romance of my own.*

*Please, if you can, be happy. I am trying my hardest here too.*

*All my love, Rose*

I fold up the letter, seal it, and take it towards the fireplace. In one of Thorn's books, I heard that fairies used to send messages to each other this way.

*Please, I beg, if there is enough magic left here, let her receive my letter. Let her know that I am safe.*

I know it is a hopeless cause, and that receiving a letter out of nowhere declaring I'm trapped in a fairy castle is going to do little to alleviate Honour's worry, but I still feel better watching it vanish into the embers.

That night, when I dream, it is of Honour in her dress, a wreath of holly in her hair, gliding towards the man she loves.



# SUMMER

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

- *William Shakespeare*

# 10



Rose is bedridden for two days, nursing a heavy cold. I spend the days beside her, reading aloud and trying not to enjoy too much the glimmer of rapt attention in her eyes.

On the morning of the third day, she meets me in the corridor, wearing a floaty crimson gown with a pattern of golden brambles on the bodice. I watched her stitching it the night before. Her hair is brushed and half done-up, a shining pile of red-brown curls, and she's donned a coat and gloves too.

"Oh! You're up!" I say.

She grins. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I had thought you may wish to take it easy today."

She shakes her head. "I've had enough of that. I'm growing restless. Shall we go for a walk?"

She heads off towards the entrance hall without waiting for a reply, all the softness and vulnerability of the last few days vanished. Perhaps it is just her, but I feel a new energy to the castle, a brightness spilling into the halls—

"Sunlight." I stop suddenly, staring out of a window at the end of a corridor. "There's sunlight—here!"

Pure, golden light floods the corridors, peeling away whatever faint imitation of light previously occupied the space. It is warm and blissful, a light so tangible you could drink it.

Outside, sunlight paints the landscape. Rose removes her gloves, rubbing the leaves of the bushes as if she has forgotten the texture of them. The icicles are melting, our snowman sagging, our winter wonderland dissolving into slush. There are sounds in the gardens—the trickle of water, and something else too.

“Is that—is that a bird?” Rose asks.

A little robin sits in the hedgerows. We stare at it as if it is the first bird we have ever seen. The little creature flaps its wings and soars into the sky, darting about the clouds with a partner.

I have not seen a bird in two years.

“They must have come through the holes in the veil,” I tell her. “It happens every now and again.”

“Birds and sunlight in one day,” Rose says, with mock surprise. “Whatever next?”



We abandon the wet slush of the garden not long after, but admire it from one of the parlours. Rose thumbs a long lock of hair as her gaze glides outwards, and I wish that I could paint this image, capture the shine of her hair, the folds of her dress, the wistful look that inhabits her eyes. It is almost a shame when the sun goes down and we retire to the library.

It is harder to concentrate on words than it usually is. I can still slip between the pages, but sometimes I find myself failing to fall in like I once did. I am conscious of other things, like the rustle of Rose’s pages, her dreamy sighs, the light the shadows cast across her cheeks. Sometimes, I fixate on the way her fingers grasp the book, clutching the sides of the covers as though bracing herself against the side of the ship. She mumbles when she reads; gasps, sighs. When she finishes, sometimes she tugs it to her chest afterwards, like a dear friend she doesn’t want to part with.

I am conscious of time passing, of the approach of the full moon in a few day’s time, but I find time dissolving, too, of entire hours passing in minutes.

I love when she gushes, when she explains to me in enthusiastic, blow-by-blow detail a story I have read a dozen times. I always want to read it again afterwards, to love it as much as she did.

Of course, she doesn't love them all. Sometimes, she throws them down in disgust, halfway through.

"Please tell me she doesn't marry that wretched Algernon."

If I remember correctly, she does. The author suggests it is a happy union, but I am not convinced. I never thought Algernon was good enough for her, either.

"I think she—"

"If Edwina marries him, I don't want to hear it."

"She... she decides to go through with the wedding, to please her father, but during the ceremony, her best friend Lucy arrives, and the two of them run off together to her great-aunt's villa. Algernon pursues them and is revealed to be the cad you imagine him to be. He attacks Lucy and Edwina, but then Great Aunt Imogen shoots him from the balcony. They bury him in the garden and live the rest of their days in peace and prosperity."

Rose blinks at me, and I wonder if I went too far with the murder. She laughs, folding the book away. "I really hope it ends that way," she says. "Find me something happy. Find me adventure and true love you can feel."

I shuffle to my feet and head over to the nearest bookcase, scanning the spines for one that fits this description, that she hasn't read before. The rate she reads, she'll have finished most of them by the time she leaves.

*Tick, tick.*

The sound of the clock's hands circling propels me towards a moment of boldness I'm sure I will regret. "I wonder, with your love of romance, you aren't a little more inclined in your own life."

She groans. "You sound like Honour. Love and marriage and babies."

"You're not interested in those things?"

"Maybe," she says, "but only for an exceptional person."

My throat tightens, wondering if I could ever come close to being exceptional for anyone.

"Books are easy," she continues. "In books, everything is neat and tidy and believable, and I can have that romance in a few hundred pages, and never have to worry about the rest."

"The rest?"



“The messy bits. The bits that come after. The bits no one wants to write about. When the couple argue, or drift apart, or...”

Or die. Like my father. Her mother.

She looks into the fireplace, her expression glazed. “I like happy endings,” she says. “But I don’t think they exist, not in real life.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but I think I’d grasp at the chance of a happy-for-now rather than a long and miserable life. Wouldn’t you?”

She shrugs. “I think I am destined for a mediocre existence. Never completely miserable, never completely happy, either.”

“You think?”

She puts on a smile and holds it for a moment, as if afraid her thoughts have become too dark. “Ah, I think I’m just unsettled by that last book. Find me another, please?”



The next day, I wake early and go for a walk around the gardens before breakfast. I find a patch of snowdrops in what used to be the herb garden the next morning, out exploring the new corners of the ground. I pick them excitedly, pausing only to wrap them with a scrap of lace ribbon, and race to Rose’s door.

She smiles when I hand them to her, a look warmer than sunlight. It gives me the courage to seize her hand and pull her into the gardens to show her the spot. Most of the snow has vanished now. Grass grows in its place.

“Look!” I grin, unable to help myself, as I point to the corner of the garden. “Snowdrops, Rose! Snowdrops! The garden is still alive! I have lost count of the years since I have last seen real flowers.”

I half want to dance with her, to grab her delicate hands and spin her around. No, not half want. There is nothing half when it comes to her. I do want to. I’m just not brave enough to.

“What’s causing this?” she asks. “Why all this change? Why now?”

“I’m not fully sure,” I say, calming down a fraction. “I was certain this place was only a year or so away from crumbling completely. And now

this..." I look at her. She is the only thing new, the only thing that's changed. "It's probably you, you know."

"Me?"

"The timings match up."

"I'm not doing anything!"

"'Tis just a theory."

"A ridiculous one."

She goes back to the castle to hunt for a tiny vase, still smiling at the gift. I try to ignore how happy that makes me, but it rises up in my chest, like water against a dam, threatening to burst.



A few days later, we curl up for a lazy afternoon beside the fire, having spent the morning racing through the grounds. It's still cold. A fire roars in the grate, and we sit beside it, each with a book in our laps. It's so comfortable that I can feel myself dozing off, but I don't want to move from my spot beside her.

I wake up on the floor a little while later, Rose smiling above me.

"What... what's going on?" I murmur, pushing myself upwards. My head feels heavy, like it belongs to someone else. It is still just about light.

"You fell asleep."

"What time is it?"

"About dinner time."

"Why... why are you still here? You should have woke me—"

She giggles. "You fell asleep on my dress. I couldn't quite wriggle out."

"Oh. Oh, my. I am so sorry—"

"It's quite all right. It was nice. You're very sweet when you're asleep."

She reaches across to touch my face, but a sudden sharpness spikes through my temples.

*Oh, oh no—*

I glance at the window. It is nearly black, and the moon is full.

The transformation.

I am supposed to be a mindless monster. Moya's curse transformed me, mind and body. It is only Mother's counter-curse that makes me otherwise, save for the night of the full moon, when dark magic is at its peak.

I become a full monster.

It was easy to manage when I was small, but as I got older and stronger, impossible. The fairies had to lock me away. But when it was just me, I never bothered. There was no one to hurt, and I was less likely to tear at myself when I had a semblance of freedom.

I still keep track of the cycle of the moon, but Rose's presence has obliterated my routine. I'd paid precious little notice to the passing of the days.

Pain ripples through me. I suppress a groan. There is no time to explain

—  
Rose frowns. "Are you all right?"

"A sudden headache," I say, limiting the lie. "Forgive me. I think I'll retire early—"

"Can I get you something—"

The offer should warm me, but I cannot feel anything but the pain pulsing in my head, and the desperate desire to get away from her. To keep her safe. To stop her from seeing what I really am.

"No, it's quite all right. Probably just too close to the fire. I just need to go lie down." I murmur a thanks and stumble into the corridor, almost falling into a bust of my great-grandfather. There's no time to go to the dungeons, no time even to get outside. I fall into my room, collapsing on the marble. Every muscle in my body feels like it's on fire.

I try not to scream, certain it will alert her.

Foolishly, I almost want her to come. I don't want to be alone. Despite the fear, despite the danger, I almost cry out. Please, please, help me. But there is only one way she can help me, and if she sees me like this, she never will.

I long for the fairies, for someone, anyone. The first transformation without them was excruciating. There was no one to keep me occupied as I waited for it to happen, to sit behind the bars and speak softly until I wasn't myself any more. And in the morning, when I woke, although there was a blanket over my shoulders and a bowl for me to clean myself up in, there was no Margaret to stroke my head, no Ophelia to clean my wounds,

and no Ariel to make silly jokes to me until I cheered up. I was always myself again after laughter.

I do not laugh much anymore, I realise. Even Rose laughs more than I do.

*Rose.*

I turn to my door, and realise it's still open. A sharp bolt of horror splits through me. I crawl towards it, but darkness clouds my vision, and I'm lost to it entirely.



I dream of Mother, I think. Of what I imagine her hands to feel like.

Then I dream of Penelope. Sweet, shy Penelope, who might have grown to like me if it wasn't for her discovering me in the throes of transformation. I was always a monster to her after that, and she a shadow in this place until she left.

When I was very little, the fairies would hold me until I transformed. Mother would sing to me through the mirror. I never felt alone, back then.

But Mother vanished. Her song stopped. And I got larger, stronger.

I'd wake up in the morning, and find Margaret's arms were bandaged. "Just scratched," she told me. "They'll be fine, soon."

And because she was magic, they were. She never scarred.

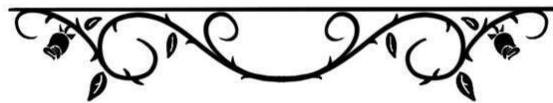
But I'd discover bits of her dress they hadn't managed to clear away in my room afterwards, shredded fabric that could have been her flesh. And during one transformation, when I reached for her, she flinched with the memory of pain.

I didn't let them touch me after that.

# 11



## ROSE



One night, almost a month after my arrival at the castle, Thorn declares he is not feeling himself, and abandons me curiously early. He rebuffs all offers of assistance, and departs to his own room. I read by the firelight for several hours, but I cannot get comfortable. I have a lavender bath, dress for bed, and pen another letter to Honour. The words do not come easily, but provide the distraction I was hoping for.

*Dear Honour,*

*Our winter here has come to a sudden but beautiful end, and I am now out in the gardens where I belong. They really are quite wonderful. I wish you could see them—*

A shadow ripples across the floor. There is something outside my room.

My heart freezes. Thorn? No. It can't be him. He wouldn't lurk outside my door, not at this hour.

But... there is no one else in the castle.

The thing, whatever it is, moves. It is big, and there is the soft clink of claws on the marble. I hold my breath.

There it is again.

"Thorn?" I whisper hopefully.

There is a low, hollow growl from outside. It is not Thorn's.

I swallow. Should I stay where I am? Did it hear me speak? Does it know I'm here? My heart thumps in my ears, capsizing my thoughts. I cannot move.

The creature shuffles on.

I wait until all is silent, before scrambling out of bed, locking the door, and pulling the dresser in front of it. Then I hurtle back to relative safety, snuff out my light, and hide under the covers. I shake beneath them, praying for morning to come.



I wake to the sound of birdsong and slither out of bed in a half-daze, my hair sticking up all over the place. I have a faint, foggy memory of a nightmare, something horrible about a monster.

Wrapped in sheets, I pull back the curtains and let daylight spill into my room, illuminating every crevice. Two little bluebirds sit on the window ledge, twittering away. The gardens are thick and lush with green, minute buds blossoming in the hedgerows. This side of the castle is dripping with ivy.

Leaving my window open, I go to dress. It is then that I notice the dresser pulled in front of the door.

It wasn't a dream.

I rush down to breakfast. It's late, but Thorn has always waited for me before. There is no one there, and no signs of anyone having eaten recently. Bread and jam is laid out, but I have no appetite for it. I head towards the library, hoping to see him curled in a ridiculous position by the fire having fallen asleep engrossed in a book. The room is deserted.

Finally, knowing I shall never be at ease until I find him, I go to Thorn's room. It is one of precious few I have never been in.

I knock politely on the door.

No answer.

I knock again, louder. Something stirs inside.

"Thorn? Are you awake? It's almost midday."

I hear something grumble and moan.

"Thorn?"

The door clicks open. Thorn appears in the gap, undressed and tousled. The room is dark behind him.

“Are you all right?” I ask, instantly forgetting why I was there.

Thorn nods sluggishly. “Forgive me,” he says, his voice husky, “I did not know what time it was. I did not get the best night’s sleep.”

“Are you ill?” I ask. Automatically, my hand goes towards his head; to stroke his hair, or check his temperature, I am not really sure.

He jerks away. “I’m fine, Rose. I shall clean up and be down for lunch.”

“If you’re not up to it, I can bring you something—”

“I’m fine.”

The door closes in my face.

He does not seem fine when he meets me in the dining room. Not unwell, just... not himself. He is often the quieter of the two of us, but there is a stillness to him now.

“Did... did you hear anything last night?” I ask trepidatiously.

“No.”

“Only... only I thought... I was sure...” He is so snappy and sluggish that another thought occurs to me. “Did you... did you get up at all?”

“I went for a walk at one point, to try and help me sleep.” He narrows his eyes, and then they slide open with realisation. “You heard me.”

I nod, fearing he can sense my thoughts. I thought you were a monster. You frightened me. “I called out to you,” I try, “but you didn’t— ”

“I was half-asleep.”

“If you’re sure—”

“Well, who else would it be?”

No one, I realise. It is only the two of us. “Would you... like to join me for a walk?” I offer, trying to sound bright. “The maze is growing. We can probably get lost in it now.”

“If you wish,” he says, making it sound as if that is the worst idea in the world.

We decide to go to the library instead, where we read for a while in angry silence. Every question, every idea I have, is rebuffed. Eventually, I ask him if he will be joining me for dinner, a question I have not asked for at least a week. We eat all our meals together now, but Thorn’s mood has me questioning what I have taken for granted.

“No, not tonight,” he says, with no explanation.

“Why not?”

“I am not hungry.”

“It’s several hours away!”

I come close to losing my temper when he uses the word, “Whatever.”

“Fine!” I say, slamming my book closed, “Go ahead and starve!” I huff towards the door, fully intending to march out and slam it behind me.

“Rose,” says Thorn quietly, stopping me in my tracks. “I’m sorry, I’m just... I’m not myself today.”

We all have our grumpy days, I reason. “Is that it?” I ask, turning to face him just a fraction.

He nods slowly.

“Because, if it were anything else... I should like to know.”

I expect that to be the end of the conversation. I don’t really feel like making it up to him. His grumpy day is making me grumpy.

“Why?” he asks.

“Why what?”

“Why would you like to know if something was wrong?”

“Nobody likes to be left in the dark,” I say, “and besides, if there were something I could do to help... I would want to do it.”

“Would you?” Thorn takes a step closer.

“Yes.”

“Why? Why would you want to help me?”

I open my mouth to tell him, quite angrily, that I am a reasonably nice person and any reasonably nice person wants to help others, but then I stop. I am not like Honour—Honour who would go out of her way to help a complete stranger—I would never help someone without considering, however quickly, the risks and time and effort involved. I am not inclined to go above and beyond. Not for people I don’t know or don’t care for.

But I care about Thorn.

“You are my friend,” I say. “And when you’re not being thoroughly miserable, you are quite a good one!”

I still slam the door behind me when I leave, feeling angry and bitter as I run myself a bath and slide under the surface.





I forgive Thorn the same way I do my family: by saying absolutely nothing for a few days and eventually getting over it. It takes him a little while to realise this, however, and he cautiously darts around me for our next interactions. We do not see that much of each other for a while anyway; I have found a new distraction. Now that life has returned to the castle, it is time to resume one of my favourite pastimes—gardening. I go out bright and early one morning in search of some garden tools, finally finding some in a small store not far from the herb garden, which is to be my first project. They are old and rusty, but sturdy enough for my purposes.

I spend the first few hours out there in the dawn, pulling up weeds, stripping out the dead plants and overgrowth. I create a huge pile of leaves and bracken. It is hard work, but I have always enjoyed it, and the rewards are reaped over a long period of time. Thorn finds me there as the clock chimes eleven.

“Good morning,” he says hesitantly. “You missed breakfast.”

I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand, no doubt leaving muddy smears across my face. “I was preoccupied.” I give him a smile, trying to let him know that I am not angry, not any more.

“As I see. You don’t need to dig in the dirt,” he adds. “The gardens do rather have a way of... sorting themselves.”

As he says this, I swear for a moment I can hear the faint tinkling of bells. I turn my head towards the sound, but he doesn’t move. I must have imagined it.

“But I like digging in the dirt.”

“Then carry on. Do you need a hand?”

“Um... you could break up those twigs for me? Clear any of the rocks and branches...”

I have barely had time to re-plant the rosemary in a sunnier part of the garden before Thorn chirps, “I’m done!” and I turn around to see a neat pile of rocks, branches, twigs and leaves.

“That was quick! What did you use to break up the branches with?”

Thorn looks down sheepishly. “My hands.”

“My brother would be very envious.”

He leans against the wall, half in shade. “I imagine it would be rather the other way around.”

“Freedom has no need for good looks,” I assure him. “His internal hideousness blinds everyone. He’d be much better off with strength. Or sense. Or intelligence.”

“I’m still trying to work out if you actually like your elder brother.”

“Me too,” I shrug, and then I feel that familiar prick of sadness, a twinge of guilt. I’m still being mean about him, even when I miss him.

There’s rustling in the bushes. I look up and see the strangest little creature under the rosemary, sweeping up loose twigs. It has a wrinkled visage and is covered head to toe in short brown curly hair, wearing a miniature mantle and hood.

“Thorn! Look!” I squeak.

Thorn scrambles in front of me, throwing out his arms as if I’m under assault. His shoulders quickly drop. “It’s a brownie.” He grins, wide and free. “We should turn our backs.”

“Is it dangerous?” It is difficult to believe, but I am learning not to be judgemental of what I see in this place. For all I know, this creature has razor sharp fangs and a penchant for human blood.

“No, they just don’t like being looked at...” He glances back at it anyway, mesmerised. “They’re supposed to be good luck, help around the house. We should leave some food out. The others will be thrilled.”

“The others?”

“The... remnants of magic. The things that clean and provide us with food.”

“They’re brownies?”

“No,” he says forlornly. “They aren’t really anything, any more.”

I look back at the little creature, but it has already vanished.

I do not see any more brownies, but I keep my eyes peeled for any signs of these remnants that Thorn described. There was something in the way he spoke about them, like... like he *missed* them. If the brownies came back, if the garden is returning to life, I don’t see why they can’t come back either. They must be more than little twinkles of light, if they can materialise food out of nowhere and attend to our whims. They must be.

Thorn was certainly right about the gardens mostly taking care of themselves, however. The lawns rarely appear in need of trimming, and even though nobody is shearing the hedgerows, they remain at a decent length. Sometimes, I think I can hear someone shearing them, but whenever I go to investigate, I find nothing but a few heaps of leaves,

which magically make their way to my compost before I can even find a broom to sweep them. I start thanking the castle whenever it does something for me, but I never get a reply.



I awake one morning to find the garden coated with a fine, white mist. Light rain, nothing like the suffocating fog that imprisons us. It looks almost magical, as if every leaf is decorated with pearls. I grab my lightest coat and go for a wander.

The foyer has emerged from its chrysalis. Cascades of ivy float in through the broken windows, ribboning down the bannisters, pooling into the hall. Wisteria winds round the pillars, fine and delicate as lace. Sunlight glitters on every surface, a myriad of colours scattered by the glass, spasms of amber and gold and honey. The wild, ethereal beauty of the palace haunts every corner, the bright, fresh aroma of spring stirring in every leaf.

The rain is feather-light, soft as silk. Tiny, shy buds begin to bloom in the hedgerows. I whisper good morning and imagine their voices. Perhaps I can finally start to identify them. There are so many that I have never seen before, that I do not know the name of. Thorn found me a book on Fey flowers, but the lack of petals on most of them make them hard to identify. The hedges are full of tiny buds, pink and white and orange and purple. A few look like snowdrops or poppies, but are the wrong size, the wrong colour. Nevertheless, impossibly beautiful. The lilies on the pond still lie closed, as do the roses, but slowly life is eking back into this place.

I stop for a moment under a large oak. It was raining like this when Honour told me that Charles had asked her to marry her. The two of us were out for a walk when we bumped into him. He was fumbling and awfully nervous, saying he had asked for her at the house. I think Honour knew then what he was there to ask her. I certainly did.

“I’ll go on ahead,” I told her.

I waited for her in the garden, despite the rain, because I was certain that she would want to tell me first. Sure enough, some twenty minutes later,

Honour came skipping out of the woodland, hair, cape, ribbons flying, practically tripping over herself. She could barely catch her breath.

“He asked me to marry him, Rosie! He asked me to be his wife!”

She was shaking with happiness as we embraced, spluttering on every word as she recounted exactly what he had said, and then we went inside to repeat the story to everyone else. Nanny screamed and started to cry. Hope and Beau both rushed into her arms. Freedom clapped her on the back. Papa almost smiled. Everyone was so overcome with joy, and I was too, for a little while.

By the time that night came, the rain had thickened into a storm. I sat in my reading nook, Hope fast asleep in her bed, listening to the hushed, excited sounds of Nanny and Honour discussing arrangements. I looked at Honour’s empty bed and realised that soon, that bed would be empty forever.

When Honour finally came upstairs, she didn’t go to her bed or start to undress. She came to me, sat down by my side. “You should say it, dearheart,” she whispered.

What I wanted to say was that I was going to miss her, that I knew we would still see each other every day, that it was silly and foolish to be afraid of change, and that I was happy for her. What came out was a rushed, sudden, and unexpectedly venomous response.

“I don’t want you to marry him.”

Honour just laughed, ignoring any malice in my voice, which made me mad at first. Of course, I didn’t mean it, but she didn’t know that.

Except, of course, she did. She took me in her arms and stroked my hair. “It’s not the end of the world.”

*I know.*

“I love him and he makes me happy.”

*I wouldn’t let you go otherwise.*

“I know you know that. It’s all right to be afraid.”

*No, it isn’t.*

“You’ll still see me every day.”

I wanted to cry then and I want to cry now, but I always so detested letting other people see my tears. My eyes begin to fill. We have not seen each other in so long now, and we were never apart before, not for a day. I was so lost then. I didn’t know what I would do without her. There was a reason I didn’t really have any close friends; I didn’t need them. I had her.

I also had Hope, but the two of us were too alike. I needed someone like Honour, who would say the things I never could, who knew what I was thinking sometimes before I thought it.

And now my bed is the one that's empty. I wonder if Honour looks at it.

"Are you all right?" A voice prickles behind me.

I brush my tears away and pretend they were rain. "Just remembering the day my sister got engaged," I tell him. "It was raining then like it is now."

Thorn tilts his head. "Not a happy memory?"

"A very happy one," I insist. "Charles is lovely." *Do not mention the tears.*

"You sounded a little forlorn then, is all," he responds. "My mistake, I'm sure."

"I..." I swallow. What am I doing? "I was worried about her getting married, and moving away... even if it was only across the village. Foolish, I know."

"I don't think so," he says. "Missing someone is rarely foolish."

I wonder if he misses the other visitors, and if he misses them for them, or merely for company.

"I've never made friends easily," I confess.

I wait for him to ask why, or disagree, but all he says is, "Oh."

"Oh?" I narrow my eyes. "No, '*oh that can't possibly be true*'? or, '*You are far too witty to lack for company, dear Rose*'—"

"Company," says Thorn, trying not to smile, "is not the same as friendship. And you said yourself that you've never tried to be someone else to get people to like you. It falls to reason that you do not make friends easily."

This is true enough.

"Honour is the closest thing I have to one," I tell him.

"What about the friend that you kissed?"

I have known James since we were children. His family used to live next door until his mother remarried and moved across town. He was the same age as I was, and we loved running around and playing with swords and making up adventures together. Then we started school, and I learnt how to read. It was more comfortable to have adventures in your own head. We were still friends, but we spent so little time together after that. I was

never alone with him, we had few conversations, and although we still liked each other, we didn't know each other.

“He doesn't... he doesn't know me,” I explain. “He doesn't understand me. I don't know him really, either. I think that friends usually do, don't they? It's not just a collection of what you know about them, but what you know *of* them. The sort of person they are. Whether their soul is shaped like yours.”

Thorn stares at me for a long moment. I wonder if he is wondering what my soul looks like, if such a thing is possible.

“What are you thinking?” I ask after a while.

“That I am glad that you and I are friends,” he says after a long pause, and then wordlessly walks back to the castle. It occurs to me, watching him go, that I ought to have included him.

*Honour is the closest thing I have to a real friend... apart from you.*



That night, I dream I'm in the gardens in full summer. Someone drifts beside me, clinging to my arm. Rose, surely. Her touch seems familiar.

I realise my arms are human. This is not unusual. I often dream I'm human, in the shape I'm supposed to wear, although I never see my face. I dream of long, pale fingers, of muscles and sinews I think are there, beneath the surface. Somewhere.

I turn to face the person by my side, only it is not Rose.

"Grace!" I say, with some alarm.

It has been a long, long time since I have dreamed of her. She looks different from my memory, different from the portrait that hangs in the tower. She looks older, although her face is as unblemished as ever. There's a calm serenity to her that almost permeates the air.

She smiles wryly. "Not whom you were expecting?"

"I... I didn't... it's just been so long—"

"Or perhaps, not whom you were wanting?" The coyness in her lips gathers volume. She was never this sly before.

"You've changed," I say.

"Death makes us change somewhat," she says sagely, but her words make me shudder. "Oh," she continues, a little sadly now, "you didn't know."

The mirrors—my only way of seeing outside the castle—stopped working shortly after she left. I saw her wedding, though. I knew that she

was happy. What happened?

"I lived very well, before I died. I shan't bore you with the details. But I was happy. So few regrets." She touches my arm. "I thought about you most days, you know. Wished you happiness. Prayed that someone could free you soon. I dreamed of seeing that day. Perhaps I still will."

I sigh. "I'm not sure it's on the cards."

"Giving up so soon?"

"It's been years!"

"I meant... are you giving up on Rose?"

I pause for a moment. I can't give up on her, I can't. As much as it hurts to hope, I find myself injured more by the thought of *not* having a future with her. Of denying myself that chance. It is worse to imagine her gone, because... because I'm not sure I will have another, after her. Hopelessness would be worse than hope.

"No," I reply softly. "I can't give up on her."

Grace does not ask for a further explanation. "Good," she says. "Because she won't reciprocate easily. And not because she doesn't feel anything for you."

"Oh?"

"We all have our demons," she says, and for the first time, she sounds sad. "Don't give up." Her voice is forceful now. "Don't ever give up."

We wander into the herb garden. Rose is there, minding the bushes, as perfect in my dream as she was in the daylight.

"She's beautiful," Grace remarks.

"Yes," I admit. "She is."

"Don't—don't be afraid."

I want to laugh and tell her I don't know what she means, but I do, and that frightens me in itself. I want to run from the fear of it all.

Grace turns to slip away.

"Grace—how do you know all of this? About what Rose is thinking—about... about what I'm thinking?"

"I'm a dead part-fey," she says, tapping her nose. "I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Good luck, my dear Beast. My friend. You will need it."





By the time Rose's second month in the castle is drawing to a close, the gardens are teeming with life, filled with butterflies, birds, hedgehogs and rabbits. Our days are filled with birdsong.

Rose has come alive too, like a flower under the sun. She is smiling and singing and distractingly pretty. I have never watched anyone with the intensity I watch her, and no one else's image has followed me back to my room at night, to sing against my dreams. She mesmerises me far more than the waiting garden, humming with expectation, never quite in bloom.

I prowl the grounds during daylight, refamiliarising myself with the wildlife while Rose prunes and pots. People might fear me, but the animals are not so apprehensive, and within days I have most of them eating out of my hands.

"How are you doing that?" asks Rose, a little crossly.

I smile at her, tugging her down to my level, and pour a handful of seeds into her lap. The birds dart around her, uncertain. Rose holds out a hand, but they flurry away.

"It didn't work."

"Have patience."

"That's really not one of my qualities."

It really isn't. I try to teach her how to fish, but as my technique is to let the fish wander into my hands and she has to use a net at very least, she quickly loses interest. She manages to teach me how to light a fire without the help of the fairies, however, and we spend an evening beside the lake dining on freshly caught fish.

One day after clearing out a rose garden, Rose falls asleep beneath a tree, sleeping for most of the afternoon. Her hair is splayed out around her, her hand curled close to her face. She looks so serene that I cannot disturb her, instead choosing to stare at her until it's almost evening. I know I should wake her—it's almost dinner time—but I'm not entirely sure of the safest way to do that. I'm still not convinced that I'm allowed to touch her, despite the many times she's touched me.

Eventually, I summon my courage, and blow in her face until she stirs. Her hand moves, her brow twitching as if disturbed by a fly. She murmurs, rubbing her eyes. “What time is it?”

“A little before dinner.”

Rose’s eyes fully, brow still furrowed. “Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

“You looked so peaceful sleeping. I couldn’t help it.”

“Well, I’m not peaceful now!”

“I can gather.”

She’s clearly annoyed at herself for some reason, and opts to spend the evening in the music room instead. She seems to be trying to compose something, but the only consistencies appear to be her slamming her fingers on the hard notes in a somewhat discordant order.

I hover by the door, wishing for the courage I found earlier when trying to wake her, but coming up short.

It’s the night of the full moon again. I have spent all day trying to drum up the courage to tell her, but, as usual, it’s fallen victim to memories of screams and the cataclysmic fear of Rose’s smile vanishing forever. If only I cared about her less. If only she was more like Angelica or Miranda.

But then she wouldn’t be Rose.

I feign the need for a quiet evening and retire to my chambers. Rose, thankfully, takes dinner in her room and does the same. I sneak out into the gardens before dark and crawl away into the maze. It seems the best place for it. I’m loath to lock myself in the dungeons, knowing I’ll likely bite and claw myself when I cannot escape. I’m eager to avoid that added pain, especially since Rose is sure to notice if I’m covered in wounds the next day.

In the maze, I’ll have the room to run without the risk of getting hurt. Even if I get out, I’ll never make it back into the castle. There’s no risk of me hurting her.

I hope.

I reach the centre of the maze and sit down beside the fountain, the moon staring down behind a veil of pale daylight. Not long now.

A shiver of something slithers down my spine. The dark echo of a person. For a moment, I can almost hear breathing.

I turn. A face stares at me from the water, pale and starved and smirking.

*Moya.*

Reason pulses in the back of my mind. Just a reflection. Just a reflection, she can't hurt you.

As usual, fear wins out. I can't even raise my hand to break the image. I stare numbly back at her, waiting for the vision to vanish, to be a nightmare, nothing real.

She keeps staring.

The pain starts in my temples, tendrilling out to the rest of me. I double over, unafraid of whimpering, and wait until it takes me.



Despite my unfortunate beginnings, my father's death, my curse and the loss of my mother, I had quite a happy childhood. I was never bored, and never alone, although sometimes I did feel lonely. The fairies were keen for me to experience everything I possibly could, or understand what I couldn't. They showed me other childhoods in the mirrors, things they couldn't bring to me. I often longed for other children to play with.

"Well, I'm small enough to be a child," Ophelia said.

"And I'm childish enough," said Ariel, sticking out her tongue.

They chased me around the room until we collapsed into fits of giggles, and I forgot why I wanted anyone but them in the first place.

Things got harder as I got older, as I became more aware of what I was missing, and could ask questions like why I wasn't like them, and why I hurt so much every full moon.

Things got harder when I learned who Moya was, when I truly understood the curse.

What I couldn't understand was why she did it. None of the answers the fairies could come up with satisfied me.

"She was envious, I think, of what your mother had," Margaret would explain.

"I think she wanted others to be as hurt as she was," Ophelia offered.

"Who cares?" Ariel spat. "She's not worth discussing."

What my mother had done kept Moya at bay for the better part of a decade. The only sign of her presence was the black, covered frame in the Hall of Mirrors. It couldn't help but draw my gaze, the amount of time I spent up there. I flecked the cover with paint once, trying to make it less scary.

Margaret was furious.

"What would I see, if I pulled down the cloth?" I asked her.

"Let's not find out," she said briskly, pulling me away to wash my mucky paws.

But a few months later, after a particularly bad transformation when I escaped, broke Ophelia's wing, and hurt myself, I wanted to see. I wanted to speak to her. I wanted to ask her why. Why she had hated my mother so much she had cursed her child.

I got up early one morning, certain the fairies were still sleeping, and dragged myself back to the Hall. I stood in front of the frame, my fingers clutching the sheet, trembling with anticipation.

I yanked it down. It fell to the floor in a long, slow movement, pooling to the marble like a puddle of black blood.

Moya stood behind it, a tall, pale figure in a purple gown, with a spill of dark hair like my mother's, and a smile like a knife.

She gave a mock bow. "Your Highness." Her voice was like ice.

I thought about running, but my muscles seized up, screwing me to the floor.

"Moya," I whispered.

Her grin sliced through me, and I knew, somehow, that like my mother could once watch me from the other reflections in the castle, Moya could see something too. She had been watching me all of my life.

"What brings the young prince to my cage on this fine day?"

She knew. She must have known why I was there. "I need to know," I said, trying to hide the quiver in my voice. "I need to understand why you did it. I never did anything to you—"

"This was never about you," she sneered. "This was never designed to punish you. Indeed, you wouldn't be suffering at all if my fool of a sister hadn't brought back your mind."

"Sister?" I frowned. "But... but Mother brought that back."

Moya's grin widened. "Oh, my dear little nephew, did no one tell you?"

"You... you're my..."

“You need not call me Aunt, if you don’t want to. I ceased being Eilinnora’s sister long ago.”

“She... Mother was your... and you...” I couldn’t get the words out. It made even less sense than before. “Why?”

“Because she took things from us that she should not have taken. Because she chose mortals over her own kind.”

Was she talking about my father, or the fact Mother chose to separate the Fey Lands from the Mortal Realm, in order to protect both?

“The mortal world... it’s not ours to—”

“Everything was ours, once. But you’re right. We lived in harmony for a while. But it could never last forever.”

“Only because you—”

“Protected our people, when the mortals started to plot against us? Took a few, tiny liberties? Many supported me, you know. Many knew I was the better queen. I would never have damned us all to save a single child.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, because I thought she might be right. I was not worth what Mother had sacrificed. No one person could ever be worth all that.

“You know, I loved a mortal once,” she continued, apparently growing bored of my silent panic, “but they are not worth loving. And they cannot love us. We are too great and magnificent and awful for them. They can never love us. And so they must fear us instead.” She smiles again, running a finger down the inside of the glass. “You should thank me, you know. No one will ever love you like this, and if you never love them... you will never be hurt. You’d be even less hurt if my foolish sister hadn’t returned your mind.”

“Prince! What are you doing?” A shriek came from the door. Margaret. I turned and fled, knocking her over with the force of my fear, my utter desperation to escape. Moya laughed as I ran, and her laugh followed me through the castle, glaring and sneering in every surface, from the polished brass to the suits of armour.

I fled towards the meadow, to the fog that separated my world from the world of mortals, and lay down there in the grass until I could breathe again.

*No one will ever love you like this.*

No one was coming to rescue me.

Mother had doomed us all.

Ariel found me a short while later.

“She’s my aunt,” I sobbed. For some reason, this seemed the most important thing. My father was dead. My Mother probably was too. I had no other blood in the world apart from the woman who had done this to me.

Ariel put her arm around me, and I longed for the days when I was small enough to crawl into her lap.

“Family isn’t blood,” she said. “Family are the ones that stick by you. The ones that choose to be by your side. The ones that love you, who want you.”

“She said that... that no one would ever...”

“Listen, who are you going to listen to? The crazy sorceress in the mirror or the badass fairy who helped put her there and stuck about to raise you afterwards?”

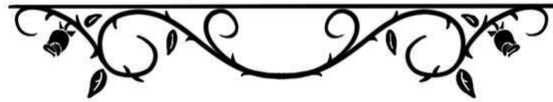
She had a good point.

“Someone is coming for you, some day,” she carried on. “So buck up.”

# 13



## ROSE



I sleep fitfully that night. Whether it is the change in the weather, or my own temper, my bed feels far too hot. The covers twist around me, my pillow feeling hard and lumpy. I drift in and out of dreams. In one, Freedom is yelling at me. He is in the forest, painting. His hands and the canvas are entirely red. He turns and screams at me, “This is your fault, Rose!” and gestures to the source of the colour; a young buck with a bolt in its side.

Then I dream I’m a little girl, hiding in the meadow. Mama is searching for me, and her voice is growing frantic. I am too young to understand her panic and I laugh instead. That’s when she sees me.

“Rose!” she cries, half in anger, half in relief. “Where have you been? I thought the fairies must have snatched you away...”

Her face fades until I see my father crying over a coffin. This one’s not a dream. A memory I cannot shake.

*No, no, not that! Not again—*

I wake, clutching the covers against my chest. I am damp with sweat, my throat parched. Something scuttles silently in the darkness, twitching

around the mirrors like a spider. Not the remnants; these are shadows. The room is thick with them.

I swallow, brushing away stray tears, and breathe in deeply. *You're still dreaming.*

A moment later, the room is still again, and I do what we all do when we wake from nightmares; I convince myself they're just that. *It was a long time ago, I tell myself. You're all right now.*

I'm not sure if years really do lessen the pain of losing a loved one. I think maybe we just get used to the pain, like losing a limb. General Beaumont had a missing leg. He said he still felt it at times. I asked him if he missed it. He said yes, but he found ways of living without it.

It was a lot like that when Mama died. We were constantly, always aware that something was missing. Her absence was physical, larger and louder and more tangible than the sight of the empty chair by the fire. You could feel where she wasn't. There was no question of not missing her. But we found ways of living without her. We weren't given another choice.

Too hot and too bothered to sleep, I get up and open the window. Moonlight and cool air pool into the room. The moon is full tonight, and glitters over the lake. After a few moments of standing there, I am cool enough. I light the little lamp by the side of my bed, pick up the book by my bedside and flick to my last page. It is the story of a young governess in a dark castle with a dark secret. Yesterday, it was positively thrilling. Tonight, I am finding it a little dull.

Something slithers in the darkness. I jolt, peering out. Nothing. I must have imagined it. No, there it is again, something large and dark.

I snuff out my candle, letting my eyes soak up the gloom. It doesn't take long; the moon is large and full tonight. It ekes out corners of the graveyard.

There is a large, black shape prowling the stones, devoid of almost any other colour. When it turns its head, even at a distance, I can see two monstrous red eyes.

Eventually, it fades into shadow.

I stay awake for several more hours, waiting for it to return, convincing myself I made it up, or it was just Thorn, or a trick of the dark. Finally, sleep calls, and I fall into another uneasy dream of screams and shadows.





Emerging from sleep, I could convince myself it was a dream. The night before is always hazy in comparison to the dawn, and much can be thought a mere fancy of the moonlight. But I cannot do this. I can still feel my skin prickling at the mere thought of those dense, angry red eyes.

It was absolutely, most definitely, real.

I dress with trembling fingers, making my way to Thorn's room at little more than a snail's pace. I keep thinking I see something in the corner of my eye, imagining that the thing is going to jump out at any second.

*Don't be ridiculous.*

Whatever this monster is, I tell myself, it likely only comes out at night.

There is no sign of any monster now, the hallways as quiet and still as they have ever been. But there is a chill that makes me quicken my gait, and I barely even knock before shoving open the door to Thorn's room and hurrying inside.

He is lying in a heap beside the bed, curled up under piles of shredded fur. For a horrible moment, I think that he's been wounded, until I remember what he said about sleeping on the floor.

"Thorn!" I call, shaking him roughly by the shoulders. He is so heavy. A dead weight. "Thorn! Wake up!"

There is a low, throaty moan, and his eyes pry open. He blinks at me sluggishly. "Rose?"

"There's something here," I rush, my words coming out in a tangled stream. "Or there was, at least. Last night. I thought... I was worried..."

"What do you mean, *something*?"

"Last night, there was something in the garden. A dark shape—and do not tell me that there wasn't, or you were out for a walk, or anything silly like that. I know what I saw!"

Thorn swallows, and sits himself up. He hugs the furs around his waist with one arm and rubs his face with another. He doesn't look well. His hair is matted and clammy, his eyes bleary.

“There’s something here, isn’t there? Something other than the remnants?”

“Oh, they are remnants, all right,” he says solemnly. “But of a much darker kind. When... when the great battle was fought, and the forces of darkness extinguished... a little of their essence, as it were, became trapped inside the walls of the castle.”

“Like... ghosts?” I swallow. The thing last night looked too tangible to be a ghost.

“Yes. Only... they’re not really dead. I hadn’t seen them for so long, however, I thought perhaps they were all gone. Dried up, like the rest of the magic in this place.”

“But the magic is coming back,” I reason.

“They can’t feed off of that,” he explains. “In fact, it should have the opposite effect. But last night being a full moon... dark magic is at its peak, then. A remnant of that power was bound to show itself, sooner or later.”

This makes a certain kind of sense, and I’ve read about the power of the full moon in one of the books from the library. But... but I have seen other things, at other times. Shadows that move of their own accord. The face in the lake.

“These things can’t hurt you, Rose,” Thorn insists. “I don’t... I didn’t want you to be afraid. You’re safe here, I promise you. No harm will come to you whilst I am still breathing.”

“I can take care of myself.” I stand up, knowing that, were I confronted with a genuine monster, this would be a complete lie. “And I’m not afraid!” I cross the room and grab the door handle. “That thing last night isn’t the only thing I’ve seen. There have been shadows of other things. And I did see a face in the lake. I know I did.”

I slam the door furiously behind me. I am growing ever more sure that the ice did not crack of its own accord. Something is lurking in this castle, something more than a shadow. Something that wants to hurt me.



I avoid Thorn for the rest of the day, either because I am annoyed by his secrets, or fearful of my own. I spend time in the gardens, although it is a grey day, and ignore meal times. It is getting late by the time I make my way back to the castle, but I am cautious of being out after nightfall.

Turning onto my corridor, I see a thin shard of light punctuating the darkness. The door at the end of the hall—the forbidden room—is open, just a fraction. I teeter towards it without a second thought.

I would feel more guilty about violating his trust if I didn't feel so angry. I do not go in. Perhaps this is so I can claim I didn't break my promise. Instead, I listen.

I can hear Thorn prowling about the room, on all fours, if I'm not mistaken. I haven't seen him walk this way in a long time.

"Rose has seen her," he says.

I crane my head towards the door. Who is he talking to? As I push my head further into the gap, three tiny pinpricks of light scuttle along the floor, clear as day. They stop in front of my feet, almost expectantly. I have the strangest feeling I am being judged.

*What?* I mouth.

Two of them trail into the room, the third remaining just a second longer. It butts against my slipper before following the others.

"I haven't seen any hint of her or her followers for years," Thorn's voice continues. "I thought, if you were gone, then she must be too, but if she's still here... you must be as well. Am I right?"

Only silence follows.

"Where are you?"

There is the sound of something crashing. Thorn has thrown something.

"Is she in danger?" he asks quietly, the rage pulled back. He sounds sad, desperate even. "Please, just... find a way to tell me. Is she in trouble? Can I protect her?"

Another long pause.

"I am not sure I could survive losing you both."

I wait a little while, but he says nothing else. As I turn to leave, I think I can hear sobbing.



A few weeks after Mama's death, Honour found me curled up under my bed, crying. The hard sobbing had stopped by then, the sobbing that came first and went on for days without ceasing, bleeding us all of tears. There were just days, days when it was all a little too much. Soon, everyone told us, it would just be moments.

Honour crouched down by the bedside. She turned her back, and I saw she had little Beau in her arms. He stared at me with large, unblinking, unashamed eyes.

"Would you like to hear a story?"

In my little nest of blankets under the mattress, I nodded.

Honour is not good at stories as a rule, but she was good at this one. So much so, that Hope appeared out of nowhere and scurried under my arm, and a pair of feet in the doorway showed that Freedom was listening too.

"On the day of Mama and Papa's wedding, the first true flowers of spring bloomed in the woods. Mama couldn't stand the thought of not having any to decorate her simple dress with, so she strolled off to find some in the early hours of the morning.

"When it came to breakfast time, and she did not return, no one worried too much. Mama did love the woods so; she was probably distracted by their beauty this time of year. And it was the morning of her wedding—perhaps she needed a little time on her own.

"But then another hour went by, and then another. The wedding was to be in a few hour's time, and the bride was still missing. So, her mother sent her sisters into the woods to search, and the rest of the party carried on readying the village for the wedding as if nothing were amiss.

"Hours ticked by, and still no Mama came. The woods had been searched; not a leaf was left unturned. The church bells tolled and the villagers assembled. Still no Mama. The groom's family twittered and fussed, and Grandmama kept on excusing and dithering—'there's a hole in her dress' 'they're just fixing her hair' 'the cart has thrown a wheel'—until there were no excuses left. Finally, Papa stormed out of the church

and demanded to know of his would-be-mother-in-law where exactly Mama was.

““*Oh, dear Henry, I wish that I could say! Alas, my darling, she is—*”

“And then, as if swept in by the clouds, Mama appeared in the village square in a shower of rose petals. She was wearing the most beautiful gown that anyone had ever seen, silk and gossamer, and embroidered with such delicate needlework that spiders themselves couldn’t have spun it. She was covered in flowers, head to toe, and never a more radiant bride had the village ever seen.

“To this day, no-one knows where Mama went during those missing hours, or how she came by such a beautiful gown. The petals eventually faded, as did the radiance of the fabric, and some who came across it later said that apart from the stitching, there was little special about it. But the villagers could never forget her beauty that day, nor the way she kissed her bride-groom at the church, with such passion they thought for a second that she might be a fairy changeling herself.”

By the close of the story, Freedom had slipped into the room and put his arm around Honour, and reached his hand under the bed and grabbed mine. I did not know what he meant by this at the time, but looking back, his actions spoke louder than Honour’s words. But they were both saying the same thing: *We’ll be all right, the five of us. We’re together. We’ll look after each other. The world is not as terrible as it appears right now. You’ll see.*

Honour made up a lot of stories about Mama. She was not dead, she was a fairy, who had returned to her own kingdom, or transformed into the flowers she so loved. I didn’t like the first excuse. I had seen her body, cold and stiff and *there*. But I did quite like the one about the flowers. Perhaps that’s why I cared for her garden so. My sister is only two years older than I am, but I have always trusted her memories of Mama far more than my own, even when she was so clearly making them up. Mama was always magical in Honour’s stories. She was perfection and light. I did not want to remember her any other way. According to Honour, Mama’s touch could heal the common cold. She could predict the weather. She always knew when someone in the village was about to have a baby, and what it would be. Freedom once told me she always knew when someone was about to die, but I think he did that to scare me.

Remembering many long, sniffing colds, occasionally getting stuck with her during rainstorms, and knowing that she could not predict her own babies all the time, I had my doubts about her mystical abilities. But I clung to them nonetheless. It kept her close, and Beau always loved the stories. I would believe anything for him.

According to my time-keeping, today is Honour's birthday. Another event in her life I will miss. I will miss Hope's too, although I will be back for both my brothers'. My own birthday isn't too far away now. Ordinarily, I wouldn't be thinking of it just yet, but this is the first birthday I will be away from home. If I don't tell anyone, it will be like just another day.

Thorn would want to celebrate it, I'm sure, but I just can't imagine a birthday without my family, and songs round the piano, and Nanny's famous raspberry sponge cake.

I miss my family with a sharp pang. I don't want to make new traditions with Thorn. I don't want to make them with anyone.

The embroidery I've been working on loses its appeal. I abandon my project and go for a long walk instead, trying not to linger on the edge of the meadow, which looks much more grey than it did this morning.

When I return, it is past dinner time, but I do not seek out Thorn. I go to my room instead, light a candle for Honour, and write her another letter. It is less optimistic than the first, and a trifle miserable, although I do wish her many happy returns. I hear Thorn moving along the corridor not long after, pausing at the door, listening out for me. I pretend to be asleep, and after a few moments, he moves on.



Rose is out of sorts for a few days, skirting around me in a way that doesn't feel like anger. She sings less and has a distracted look about her features, nothing I can pin.

I am afraid of asking her if she's missing her family. The answer is sure to be yes.

And she is afraid of something, too. That monster? Moya's face? Or something... something else?

I dream of Grace again. We are in the gardens, watching Rose. I hold out my human hand towards her, and imagine what it must be like to slip it into hers. It turns back into a paw again, as if even my dreams can't fathom such a thing.

Grace sighs. "You and she are so alike..."

I frown. "How so?"

She shakes her head, a cascade of gold curls falling around her shoulders. Tiny flowers fall from her tresses and take root in the grass, turning into blooming buds.

Definitely a dream.

"You're both so afraid of nothing."

"We both have a lot to be afraid of."

"You do," she says darkly, "but you are afraid of the wrong thing."

"Could you be less cryptic, please?"

"Possibly," she said, "but it is your dream."

“Then I demand a better answer than that.”

She laughs, long and hard, elbowing me in the side. Her laughter slides into a sad smile. “It isn’t real if I have to explain it to you.”

She starts to walk away, turning towards the meadow, the day bursting into golden light. It starts to swallow her.

“Grace!” I call, stopping her in her tracks, “Are you... are you really here?”

Grace raises an eyebrow. “I’m dead.”

“But... you are more than a dream, yes?”

“Perhaps.”

“How is that possible?”

“There is magic in the castle again,” she explains. “Enough to allow me a little visit.”

“Then where are you going?”

“To where I’ve always been,” she says. “I’ll be back, Thorn.”

When did she start calling me that?

And why does it feel like that name was always mine?



The next morning, I head downstairs, Grace’s words still tight in my chest, and start sweeping furiously. Anything for something to do.

“Good morning!”

Rose appears behind me in a floaty blue gown studded with pink roses, a vision of spring. She is as light as air. I drop my broom with a clatter.

“Ah, morning!” I rush.

“Why are you sweeping?”

“I was... trying to find something to occupy myself with. I wasn’t sure I would see much of you today. I was afraid that—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says quickly. “Let’s put it aside.”

I am too grateful she’s speaking to me again to push for what secret she’s been keeping, especially as I am hardly one to talk. We eat breakfast together and head out into the gardens. I help her out with replanting some of the large bushes. I love what she’s doing with the place, how the whole



thing seems wild and beautiful. She mumbles something about a bench, and I spy a great stone slab not far away I think might work. I sling it over my shoulder and bring it to her.

“Will this do?” I ask.

Rose explodes with laughter.

I blink at her. “What? Not appropriate?”

“I was thinking more of a small wooden seat, not something so heavy!”

“I can take it back—”

“No, no it’s fine, just put it down in the corner.”

Together, we manoeuvre it into the perfect place. She says she’d like an arbour, but doesn’t fancy the work today.

“Let’s go down to the lake.”

It’s a bright morning, but a greyness slithers in as we walk, turning the surface of the water almost black. Rose stills beside me, saying nothing again, her words frozen behind an unreadable mask.

I wade in and try to catch some fish for supper, but there is little to be had today. The blackness is unsettling. I wonder if Rose is thinking of the first time we came down here, when she saw Moya’s face in the lake.

I want to ask, but I’m afraid it might just be that she’s still mad at me, so I hold it back and sit down beside her, telling myself it’s enough that she is just allowing me to be this close to her.

But it is not enough.

It never will be.



A greyness comes to the castle, the fine weather dissipating. The air seems grainy with it, like a cold dust. Rose abandons the gardens temporarily and holes up in the library, still quiet, still contemplative.

One evening, I bite the bullet and ask the question I’ve been dreading.

“Rose, are you... are you happy here?”

She bites her lip, looking down, fresh pain glimmering in her eyes. “No,” she says, quiet as a whisper. My heart sinks. “But... I’m not unhappy, either. And that part I think I owe entirely to you.”

Something almost like joy rises in my chest, but is tempered by her earlier admission. She is not happy.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Not right now,” she replies. “But maybe one day.”

I nod, and my eyes move past her to rest on the clock atop the mantle. It ticks a little too loudly tonight. Do we have enough time for her not to trust me?

Not that I have ever given her a reason to. I hated myself for lying to her when she asked me about the monster, but the lies came more easily than the truth. She is the first to truly, genuinely see beyond my appearance. The first I’ve ever truly hoped could see everything, *be* everything.

I can’t risk losing that. I can’t.

I swallow my secrets, and she swallows hers.



Rose brightens a little after this exchange, and not long after, while we are eating a light lunch one afternoon beside her newly-erected arbour, she turns to me and says, “It’s my birthday in two weeks.”

I wonder if this is part of what’s been bothering her, the thought of spending it away from her family. Perhaps she’s annoyed by being bothered by it, like a childish secret laid bare. I sense it would be unwise to ask about either. “Your birthday?” I say brightly. “Well, we must celebrate!”

“We don’t have to—”

“Of course we must! What else are we going to do? How do people celebrate birthdays again? I recall there’s something about a cake—”

The fairies used to do something to celebrate my name-day, but there was a limit to the festivities we could accomplish with just four of us, and mortal occasions are different. I used to watch them in the mirrors.

Rose frowns at me. “You don’t know how people celebrate birthdays?”

“I’ve read a little.”

“But what about your own?”

“Well, I’ve had them, of course, but...” I look around, my gaze finally settling on a mirror at the far end of the courtyard. Ivy spills over it. I am half-horrified by the image of the two of us together, half mesmerised. “It has been a long time since I’ve had anyone to celebrate it with.”

“Well,” says Rose, suddenly beaming, “that settles it, then.”

“Settles what?”

“You’ll have to share mine.”

“That’s really not—”

“Well, it’s my actual birthday, and I insist!”

At this, I cannot help but grin. The idea of sharing anything with her delights me. She pops another strawberry in her mouth and turns back to the book in her lap, as if she has no idea of the gift she’s just given me, the monument of her words.

A gift. I’ll need to get her a gift.

I watch her eyes as they sink between the pages of her novel, watch them flit back and forth between the words with a hunger. She is transfixed, absorbed, betwixt and between. She has been transformed into a liminal creature, belonging neither to this world or the one she reads.

I have often supposed that I might look like that, when I read. Rose manages to make reading look bewitching, however. I could stare at her for hours.

For the first time, I feel myself truly falling for someone. My heart has felt flickerings of emotion before, the faint stirrings of hope. But this is not that. I am not hopeful that I might fall in love with Rose, and she with me. I am painfully aware of how easily I could fall for her, and terrified that she may not fall in love with me.

For the first time, I do not want it. I do not want the hope, the pain. All too soon, I could love her, and she could reject me, and I could die. The possibility of death has never been so pressing.

Rose has no idea of the fear pulsing through me. She is smiling, still on the same page.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask her, shelving any fear in the face of any beautiful distraction she could offer me.

“Oh, just birthday plans,” she smiles, and nudges my shoulder.

Her touch alone could be the death of me.



The next two weeks pass in a colourful blur of activity. Rose and I make bunting together. I'm a clumsy cutter and an impossible sewer, but she fixes every wonky triangle into a thing of beauty. I make up for my inadequate skills in that department by stringing everything up in the room selected for our festivities.

I spirit in a music box that plays a variety of music, and pull in the harp at Rose's request, sourcing cards and a chess board as we lack the people for the other games that Rose enjoys. She tells me brightly about musical chairs and guessing games, for once not sounding remotely forlorn when she talks of home.

Much time is spent obsessing over her present. There is plenty of jewellery and fine dresses hanging about that I could give to her, but there's little thought in that, especially as she is welcome to them at any time. I'd like to get her a book, but have access to nothing that she doesn't. I'd write her a poem if my fingers could craft something legible, or if I wasn't afraid the paper would crack under the weight of whatever words I could summon for her.

I have to make her something. A made gift is the only thing capable of holding a modicum of my true feelings. I'd like to give her a rose that never fades. The idea stays with me for several days, and eventually, I take all the materials I think I'll need and head up to the roof terrace. Tiny buds sit among the rosebushes, not quite in bloom. I pick one of the smallest and take it over to the fountain, arranging chain, amber, metal around it.

"I know this might be asking a lot," I speak to the fairies, with only a shadow of a hope that they can hear me, "but may I borrow some of your magic?"

The water begins to glow.



Three days before the birthday, I realise it's going to fall on the night of the full moon. There is nothing I can do to avoid this—her birthday cannot be rearranged. I'm hopeful that as we're spending the entire day together, and the nights are getting shorter, I can easily claim tiredness by the time the moon rises.

If I had any plans to tell her this time around, they are quickly ferreted away by the steadfast belief that her birthday will be ruined if I do.

It's so easy being around her, that I barely think of anything else, like the shadowy, dark parts of myself are evaporated by her company. Every secret ceases to exist when we're together.

I suppose it's not just her I'm lying to.

I'm angry at Moya and fate once again, but not just for the curse. I'm angry that they're stealing away time I could spend with Rose.

Foolish, perhaps, given how much time we already spend together, but I am still greedy for her presence. I wonder if that feeling will grow any more before it abates. It already feels like the kind of longing one could die from.

*Oh, Thorn, you really are in trouble.*

The day dawns like any other. Rose meets me in the parlour in a simple blue gown, aproned up and ready for something messy. We smile at each other almost giddily.

"Happy birthday," I say, at the exact time she does. We both laugh, and I try to wriggle away from the pleasure the sound of her laughter strikes in me. "So," I continue, "what first?"

"First, we breakfast," she tells me, "and then... we make cake."

I have never made a cake before in my life. Even when the fairies had forms, Margaret refused to let me in the kitchens after a particularly disastrous incident in which I coated the room in flour and sugar attempting to re-create a snowy scene in July.

This memory does not make me any less of an enthusiastic pupil for Rose, as she carefully measures out the ingredients and sets me to mixing.

I'm a bit too vigorous, and coat the surfaces and most of myself in thick dustings of flour.

"Thorn!" Rose laughs.

"What?"

"You've aged about thirty years."

"What?"

She tugs at my elbow, pulling me into the path of a mirror in the hall. The blackness in my fur has almost vanished, hidden beneath a veneer of white. Rose grins, and for once, and even though I am still vastly aware of the differences between the two of us, I do not find it so jarring.

"Oh, dear," I say, looking down at my feet. "Am I hideous, Rose?"

She pulls my ear. "Very," she says, her face alight with mischief.

"Oh, well. Guess I'll just have to make you hideous too."

I shake until the flour comes off like a cloud, covering her in fine powder. She shrieks my name, beating me with the wooden spoon as I chase her all over the kitchen.

It's almost more mess than I made as a boy, and it takes us a long time to clear up, although neither of us seems to mind.

Eventually, the cake is baked, cooled, iced and decorated. It looks awful, but Rose laughs and says it will taste wonderful. We transfer it to the party room, lay out the rest of the food, and head to our rooms to dress for the festivities. The fairies have laid out a blue and silver ensemble for me, and even though I usually find it ridiculous to attempt to dress up, I don't complain. I slide into it, place Rose's present in my pocket, and head back to wait for her. She appears a few moments later in a gown like crushed sunset. A lace ribbon has been woven through her hair; the one I gave to her with the snowdrops. She looks wondrously, impossibly lovely, but it's that action that warms me most.

Probably a coincidence, I tell myself. There's no way she did that deliberately.

"You look... lovely," I manage, wanting to say more but finding the words turn gummy in my mouth. *You are the fairytale creature, not me. I want to paint you.*

"Thank you." She smiles, casting her eyes over my own outfit. "I like your new waistcoat. Who made it?"

"Oh, er, it was just something I found," I say, scratching the back of my neck, unwilling or unable to explain Ariel, Margaret and Ophelia and half

of my history. Of course, it's ridiculous for a creature my shape to have fancy clothes.

"It suits you." She twirls a lock of hair around her finger, and I wish more than anything I was permitted to stroke it too. "Shall we eat?"

We dine on sandwiches, fruit, cheese and biscuits, followed by extremely generous helpings of cake and sweet wine. We blow out the candles together, and Rose sings me 'Happy Birthday' with the harp. I repeat the words for her, although I cannot play the instrument. She challenges me to a game of chess, followed by 'Beggar My Neighbour'. It is a simple game that goes on for far too long, and if there was a way not to win, I would prolong it, just to spend a little longer wrapped up in a task with her, watching her face as the cards fall in or out of her favour.

"Another game?" I suggest.

Rose gets up. "I think it's time for a dance now," she says, going over to the music box. A jaunty tune springs to life.

"A dance?" I ask, trying to hide the fear in my voice. "Are you sure? I can't really..." I look down at my long legs, my huge back paws, and imagine stepping on her feet. For others, they probably just worry that they'll be awkward. I'm more worried about crushing her.

Rose frowns. "You were graceful enough on the ice."

"Yes, but..." *That wasn't dancing. That wasn't being so close to you.* My heart pounds at the thought.

"Suit yourself."

As she spins, her dress fans out into a flurry of layers of petticoat and delicate embroidery. Her hair, too, is lifted from her face, and catches the light from the fire, making her glow like the evening flame.

I want to join her, to touch her, to be with her. The cloud pressed at the horizon.

I stand behind her, wishing for the courage to speak.

Her face breaks into a smile when she turns and sees me. "Changed your mind?"

I can only nod.

"Good."

She seizes me by the hands and charges down the room, pulling me with her, utterly and completely unafraid and unaware of my awkwardness, which dissipates in seconds as she folds in and out of my arms. We speed

up, going faster and faster, spinning around, the two of us almost out of breath by the end of the song.

“There,” Rose pants, “that wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“No.”

“Were you afraid you’d step on my feet?”

“A little,” I admit. “I’ve never danced with someone before.”

“What, never?”

“No.”

I must have danced with the fairies, when I was small enough not to crush them, but I don’t remember it. And that’s different to dancing with Rose. Everything’s different with her.

She goes quiet for a moment, and I wonder if I’ve said something to make her feel awkward. A silence hums around us.

“So, presents?” I suggest, breaking it.

Rose grins. “Presents.”

“Close your eyes.”

Her eyes dip closed, and I reach into my pocket for the gift, dropping it into her outstretched palms. It is a small amber pendant the size of a pebble, containing a tiny, perfect rosebud.

Rose’s eyes gleam, as if the thing resting in her hands is imbued with magic, and not merely a simple trinket.

“Do you like it?” I dare to ask.

“Yes,” she says, her voice very faint. “It’s beautiful. It’s perfect.”

“Then it suits you.”

She brushes her hair over her shoulder and turns, gesturing for me to fasten it around her neck. My fingers skim her pale flesh, but they are incapable of such a precise action.

“I—I can’t...”

Rose completes the action herself, but catches my hands before they fall away. She does not let go, and I can feel her gaze on me even though I am too embarrassed to reach it.

“Where did you find it?” she asks.

“I, er, made it. With a little help.”

“Thank you.”

Her hands finally drop away, but the ghost of her touch, and her words, linger still. She pulls a little black pouch out of her pocket and pries open the string, dropping something warm into my hands.



It is a polished piece of rosewood, on a leather string, fashioned in the shape of a thorn. No magic made this. She carved it herself.

And it matches mine. However different the pieces look, somehow, they go together.

“Rose, this is... this is lovely, thank you. Thank you so much.”

I want to hug her, but before I can find the courage, she’s looping the pendant over my head. I bend to receive it, like a knight being bestowed with a title.

“We match,” she says, grinning again.

A smile pours out of me, unbidden. I cannot stop myself. Why should I stop myself? Rose has never done anything but return my smiles.

Somewhere, in the distance, a wolf howls.

“What was that?” I whisper, half-hoping I’ve imagined it.

“A wolf, I think.”

“A wolf.” I sigh. Heaven knows where they have been all these years, whether they’ve just found a way of crawling through the boundary or have lived in suspended hibernation all this time. Either way, their return is not a welcome one. I will not be able to stalk the grounds safely tonight. “It has been years since I have heard one.”

“They were common enough back home,” Rose says, a touch of sadness dusting her voice. “I have always had a strange affinity for them.”

“You like wolves?”

“They sound so beautiful when they howl. Sad, impossibly lonely, but beautiful too.”

I wonder what this says about her, the lonely girl who dreams of howling. I wonder how she could be lonely with such a large family, but I don’t ask that. I’m aware how late it’s getting, how I’ve lost track of time being caught in her sweet rhythm, and I’m going to have to lock myself in the cells tonight to keep away from the wolves. I repress a shudder at the thought, trying not to fixate on the damage I can do to myself.

“I have never liked wolves particularly,” I tell her, swallowing hard. “And you wouldn’t either, if you’d ever fought with one. I wonder why they’ve returned.”

The clock chimes seven. I jolt involuntarily. “It’s getting late. We should head to bed.”

“To bed?” The disappointment flickering across her face is impossible to ignore.

"I'm... I'm tired," I say, wishing I could think of a better excuse, wishing I could just tell her and be done with it and not be a liar and not be afraid. I wish I knew which was worse. "I wouldn't want to..."

"To what?"

"Nothing."

"Haven't you... Did you not enjoy yourself?"

I still, struck by her words. How could she possibly think that? "Today has been... one of the very best days," I say, with some difficulty, "I think we should leave it like that."

"But—"

"You should stay in your room tonight."

"I doubt that the wolves are going to come into the castle."

"I mean it." I snap, sudden visions of Rose being chased by wolves, or by me, coursing through my mind. "It's better... safe than sorry. Stay inside."

"All right," she says, her brow furrowed. "I wasn't going to wander out anyway."

"I'm sorry," I say, aware that I've upset her. "Shall... would you like some more cake? To take back to your room?"

"I'm not hungry." The old stiffness, the one I remember from her first few days, frosts across her. I don't have the time to thaw it, no matter the desire.

"Let me walk you back to your room."

This, at least, she accepts. I feel like I can't breathe until I know she's safely stowed inside her chamber, away from the wolves, away from me.

"Goodnight," I say, in lieu of sorry. I'll find some way of apologising to her tomorrow, if I'm in any fit state to.

I want to kiss her cheek, like I've watched young people courting in the mirror do on countless occasions. I'm not even sure she'd rebuff me. But I don't deserve it. I don't deserve any of her.

I am a liar, and if I don't get out of here soon, I'll be a monster too.

I flee from the castle, racing across the grounds, conscious of the setting sun and rising moon. I don't stop to calculate how long I have to get to the graveyard where the dungeons are located.

Something moves across my path. A shadow, dark and grey. I still. A wolf. Half my size, but still powerful and strong. I could take him.

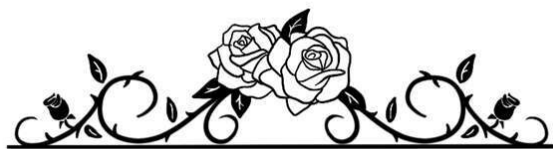
What I can't take is the two that come crawling out of the mist behind him.

I could roar, could try to frighten them off, convince them that I am the fiercer predator. But I am conscious of alerting Rose, of frightening her, or worrying her, although there is a sliver of joy I feel at the idea that she could be worried for me at all.

I stare at them, immobile, hoping that they will think the better of it, that they will turn and flee.

When they creep closer, I offer them a growl.

It does not work, and a second later a set of fangs races up to meet me.



## ROSE



After the party, I had planned to have a nice bath, unwind with a book, maybe put my hair up in rags. None of this appeals to me any more, not with Thorn being so... evasive. Evasive, and worried.

Not a thrilling mix.

I hover in front of the fireplace, staring somewhere between the flames and mirror. For a second, I think I see something—a sharp flash of darkness in the glass. But the moment I turn around, there is nothing. Only shadow lies behind me.

“Happy birthday, Rose,” I tell my reflection.

The sound of a low, throaty growl tears me from my reverie. I run to the window. Three grey shapes move in the trees. Wolves. What are they growling at?

It is still just light. I press myself against the glass, trying to expand my line of sight. There is something else there, too.

*Thorn.*

Thorn on all fours, staying perfectly still, trying, I think, to look like the fiercer predator. It should work. He is far larger than any of them. He has horns, fangs—claws too. He should be able to frighten them off.

*He should.*

I don’t know what sets them off. I don’t know if they notice his clothes, or sense something wanting in his growl, something human and vulnerable. Perhaps it is none of these things. Perhaps they reason that

there are more of them, and he is a threat, and they are better off taking him down. I do not know how wolves think.

All I know is that when the first one launches at Thorn, the rest follow, and when one of them sinks its teeth into his back, I begin to run.

\*

It would be foolish to rush out into the open, utterly defenceless, so I race into the armoury first and grab a crossbow from the wall. It has been years since I have practised with moving targets; will it be any good against claws and fangs?

I'm still attaching the quiver to my hip as I tear into the gardens. It is not hard to find them—I just follow the sounds of growling and snapping. One of the wolves is already downed by the time I reach them, but the other two circle around Thorn. The forest behind them is moving. More are coming.

I pull myself up on a nearby statue, load my first bolt, and fire. It hits the ground beside the second wolf, but it does not seem to notice.

Thorn does.

I load another arrow, but he shakes his head wildly.

I fire again.

The second shot hits one of the wolves in the shoulder, but it's only a graze. The arrow strikes the floor. Now the wolves take notice. Instantly, both pairs of eyes are on me. I scramble frantically at the statue, trying to pull myself into its arms, but I have never been the best of climbers. I do not gain an inch above the pedestal, and the wolves scramble at my heels.

A terrific roar rips through the air, and Thorn's hand comes tearing out of nowhere. No, not a hand, not today. Today, it's a paw, a paw with fully-extended claws that sink into the wolf's back and drag it along the ground.

"Run!" he bellows.

I leap from the statue and stream back towards the castle, but slow when I realise that Thorn is not following. He is on the ground, wrestling with the two of them, a mass of fur and fang.

"Thorn!"

"Get to the castle!"

"But—"

He tears one of the wolves from his back and sends it flying into the statue where I stood, seconds ago. Dust and stone explode into the air. He

grabs the other by the back of its throat and pins it against the ground. Its back legs flail wildly.

“I can handle a few wolves! Lock the door and don’t come out—”

“And leave you here with them?”

“I’ll be fine!” His words are less like words now, more like sounds. He stops for a minute, shuddering. Is he injured? Badly? The light is growing dim. It is difficult to tell.

More wolves howl in the distance.

“Go, Rose!”

I do not want to go. I *do* want to go. I want to flee for safety and I don’t want to fight, but I also don’t want to leave him here to face those monsters alone.

I mount another arrow and fire it at the wolf emerging from its slump at the bottom of the statue. This time, it hits its mark.

“Rose!” Thorn screams. “*Leave!*”

This time, the roar is directed at me. When he looks back, he doesn’t look like Thorn any more. His face is contorted, his fangs bared.

The rest of the wolves are nearly upon us, and I’m shaking.

“Go,” he snarls, charging towards them.

Somehow, I find the strength to move. I break back to the castle, his howls and the wolves’ howls meshing together in a discordant cacophony that invades my very flesh. My ears scream, the breath inside me spiking against my heart. But I don’t stop. I reach the castle, slam the doors shut behind me, and fly up the stairs.

Halfway up, I hesitate. An awful, monstrous, screeching howl slices straight through the stone.

That was not a wolf. That was something else. And Thorn is still out there.

I swallow, lowering myself down, my crossbow raised. Any minute now, he’ll be coming. I’ll cover him when he does.

He doesn’t.

Night penetrates the room, moonlight spilling across the marble. The beams cut themselves on the jagged fragments of glass. No Thorn comes. It grows colder.

The wolves continue to howl, but eventually, the wailing subsides. Are there fewer of them, or are they further away? Is Thorn trying to lead them away from the castle?

Is he trying to protect me? Did I make things worse by going to his rescue?

*His rescue.* What was he even doing out there in the first place?

A chill I have not felt in many weeks pervades the air. I light a candle, but it emits little warmth. The shadows crawl closer as I watch the wax slowly dribble into a stub.

Still no Thorn.

I cannot possibly sleep with him still out there, surely? But then it occurs to me that he told me to lock the door. He will not be coming back here. He has probably shut himself in one of the many outbuildings.

I can't hear anything anymore. That must mean that it's over.

I don't want to go upstairs. I want to go out and find him, but I know that that is a foolish idea. I will not help anyone by putting myself in danger.

Finally, I return to my room, undressing slowly, carefully, still hoping that at any moment, I will hear him knocking at the foyer and have to dash out again. My hopes are met only with silence, and soon all of my clothes lie in a pile on the floor. I fold them away and sit by the very faint embers of the fire.

"Is anyone there?" I call out, hoping to see the faint little sparks again, the ones that scolded me for eavesdropping. I want them here now, even if they hiss at me for leaving him.

*You did the right thing,* says a voice.

*Sure, for yourself,* says another.

I am such a nasty, horrible person. I can't believe I left him there. He was hurt, too, of that I was sure—

The thought gives way to several tears, which swiftly turn into choking sobs, and I fall asleep on the rug, praying for home, hoping against hope that he is all right.



I wake painfully early, pale, bluish light trickling through the curtains, with a heart as heavy as lead. I grab my dressing-gown and head,

wishfully, straight to Thorn's room.

"Thorn?"

When all I am met with is stony silence, I open the handle and peer into the room.

No one is there. Not a hint of Thorn, not a whisper of anything living at all. His bed beside the hearth lies cold and untouched. The stillness is grave-like.

I go back to my room, pull on my boots and coat, and head into the gardens, taking my crossbow with me just in case. A cold fog lingers over the lawns, enveloping the trees. My voice echoes, bouncing back against the endless, white landscape.

I find a few dead wolves and a path spotted with blood, but it is impossible to tell who or what it belongs to. I feel no sympathy for the creatures now, no kinship with these things, though they look far more peaceful than they did last night.

He took down a number of them, which is promising. And he is surely too large to be dragged away if...

A shadow runs across my path.

"Thorn!" I call out desperately. "Where are you?"

I don't know how long I scream his name. I search the stables, the coach house, the graveyard, the ruined chapel, the boathouse. All the outbuildings I know of. All the places that could offer shelter. There is no sign of Thorn, but I continue searching until my voice is hoarse.

He can take care of himself, I reason, at the same time that my heart thumps wildly in my chest. *Be all right, be all right.*

All that is left is the woodlands, but I'm aware that that is where the wolves are likely hiding too, and the fog is getting thicker. I will not be able to search much longer.

My hands clench around my crossbow. I summon my courage and head for the trees, calling out as loudly as I dare. A few rabbits scuttle about the undergrowth, a couple of squirrels. No voice reaches me, and the fog grows denser still.

"Thorn?" I whisper.

I hear something else. A muffled, tiny whimper. Inhuman, but plaintive. Pitiful. It cannot be Thorn, surely? It sounds like a dog. On a whim, I whistle.

The whimper gets a little louder, turning into a bark.



I follow the noise to a wilder part of the woods. It is so overgrown it's virtually uninhabitable, unexplored thus far. As I go closer, I see something moving in a patch of brambles. I drop down. A pair of large, yellowy eyes stare back at me.

"Oh dear," I say softly, "we've gotten ourselves in a right pickle, haven't we?"

It's a young dog, more a puppy really: long-haired, and covered in mud. Its front paw is tangled in the brambles. As I reach to pet it, it growls at me.

"None of that," I warn. "I'm trying to help you."

It makes a feeble snap, but I catch its muzzle with one hand, trying to soothe with the other. I pat its head, rub its ear.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

The creature continues to snap, and I realise that it's looking at my crossbow.

"This?" I gesture towards it. "This isn't for you."

It doesn't seem to believe me, but I unbuckle it and slide it out of view. It's a little more at ease as I try to free it. The brambles are still tangled in the poor thing's paw, but I need better light and probably a pair of tweezers to fix it. I can't help it here. Instead, I take off my coat and wrap it up. It struggles for a bit, but then simply shakes in my arms. It is quite heavy, and the walk back takes longer than ever. I cannot help Thorn right now, but I can help this little thing.

The fire is already going when I get back to my room, and the bath running. I lower the dog into shallow waters. It trembles as I wash away the dirt to try and see what I am dealing with.

Mud free, I gather him in a towel and place him on the hearth. He is shaking less now, in the warmth, as I dry him off. Finally, I get to the injured paw. He struggles as I pry the brambles away from his flesh, and I have to pin him down in order to do it safely. A couple of them are deep, and the floor is dotted with blood.

Eventually, the task is over. I leave him licking his wound by the fire whilst I hunt for food. Unsurprisingly, a meaty bone materialises on my table by the fire, but when I turn around, he's hiding under my bed. I coax him out with the bone and lure him back to the fireside, where he sits contently, gnawing. He seems much happier now, but still jerks and growls

when I try to stroke him. He's a grey, brownish colour, quite scrawny and pathetic looking. Where did he come from?

The clock chimes two. Thorn has been missing all day. Where has he gone?

"I don't suppose you saw anyone today, did you, little one?" I ask my new pet.

He blinks back at me.

Leaving him to get settled in, I try to eat myself, but I can only manage a few mouthfuls. The incident with the dog has been a welcome distraction, but there is nothing more that I can do for him now. My thoughts return to Thorn. I imagine him lying in a ditch, too hurt to call out.

What if... what if it's worse than that? What if he's dead, and I am alone here? What if it's my fault, and he would have been fine as long as I stayed inside?

Far off, the main door swings open.

*Thorn.*

I race towards the entrance hall, my heart leaping like some demented creature. I want to scream his name but I can barely breathe until I see him, standing at the threshold. He is dishevelled, his cloak muddy and torn, but he's alive.

I hurtle down the stairs, stopping a few feet short of him, and am just about to throw my arms around him when he speaks.

"I saw your crossbow in the woods," he says numbly. "There was some blood nearby. I thought—"

"I rescued a dog," I say quickly. "This morning. I locked myself in all night, just like you told me."

"Why were you out in the first place?" His voice sounds rough, even... even angry.

"Excuse me?" I say. "Why was I out there? You were getting attacked! Why were you out there?"

"It doesn't matter—"

"Of course it does! You can't put yourself in danger and be mad at me for trying to help you—"

"I can look after myself."

I gesture to the wounds seeping through his clothes. "Clearly!"

"It takes more than a few wolves to defeat a monster like me."

“You are not a monster!”

“Look at me!”

“I am looking at you!”

I close the space between us, reaching for one of his hands, but he jerks it out of reach. His nails are coated with blood.

“Do you know a man who can rip apart wolves with his bare hands?” he asks.

I know men who would like to, but I do not like them. And I do not think you are one of them.

“I didn’t say you were a man,” I snap shortly. “I said you weren’t a monster.”

Thorn scoffs. “You don’t know what you say.”

His tone is twisted and bitter and it makes my blood boil. I don’t know what *I* say? As if I haven’t been here long enough to know something of the person he is, however much he tries to keep from me. He may not be a monster but he is certainly infuriating.

“Neither do you!”

I was stupid to have worried about him. He clearly doesn’t care. And there’s not been one word of an apology for making me worry about him all day. I suppress the childish urge to stamp my foot and scream that I hate him. Instead, I turn on my heels.

The whole way back to my room, I wait for him to stop me.



The climb up the stairs is agony, but finally I reach my door, pull off my cloak and the tattered remains of my shirt, and drop into a puddle beside the fireplace. Clothes, bandages, and a steaming bowl of water from the fountain have been laid out for me. I pick up a rag and start to dab at my wounds, trying not to hiss. Some of them are awfully deep. Some of them I can't reach.

My mind turns to Rose. I'd been so terrified that something had happened to her, I hadn't been prepared for the anger I'd feel at finding her completely unharmed. Why couldn't I just have been relieved? I should have been *grateful* that she'd tried to aid me. Surely that meant she cared, at least a little?

I curse myself for my response, wishing for the power to claw back my words, and the bravery to tell her everything.

There's a sudden hammering at the door.

Rose.

"Yes?" I reply, my voice unsteady.

"Is there a monster in the grounds?" she demands.

I freeze, unable to answer.

"Is there?"

Yes, yes, yes. But it's me. I'm the monster everyone says I am and if you finally see me for what I am I won't be able to bear it. Not you. Not you of all people—

“Thorn!”

“Yes,” I tell her. “There is.”

“Why wouldn’t you just tell me—”

I stride towards the door. “Oh, I don’t know,” I say, wrenching it open, “because maybe ‘*Oh, hello Rose, nice to meet you, I hope you enjoy your imprisonment here. I should mention, once a month the castle plays host to a ravenous monster that might eat you. Have a nice stay*’ is not the best way to welcome someone!”

I glare at her, waiting for some venomous reply, the retort I deserve, but she does not give it. Her face is white and large and fearful. Was I too loud? Too fearful?

“What?” I bark.

“You... you’re... *Thorn*,” she whispers, choking on my name.

I look down, suddenly conscious of my missing attire and shredded flesh. “It’s nothing,” I say, trying to disappear behind the door. “I can manage.”

Rose marches into my room. “Why didn’t you say anything—”

“I didn’t really see the point. You don’t have to help—”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I want to.”

“Why?”

I know the answer is probably because she’s good and kind, because she’d help anyone, but a part of me aches to hear that she wants to help me.

No, not a part. *All* of me. All of me wants her to want to help.

“You helped me,” she says instead. “When I first came here and cut my hands. And when I fell into the ice—”

“I had help,” I say shortly, slightly deflated, and not wanting to downplay the role of the fairies.

“The little... remnants?”

I nod.

“You helped me,” Rose continues. “Let me help you. Please.”

I sigh reluctantly, and lower myself into a chair beside the fire. Rose turns to the equipment laid aside for cleaning. As much as I don’t want her to see me in this way, as much as I don’t want to trouble her... I want her with me. I want her to care.

“I’m still mad at you for not telling me about the monster,” she says, her voice brittle. She presses a hot cloth to the first of my wounds, and I

manage to hold back a wince. She's incredibly gentle.

"I know," I reply, equally quietly. "I'm just... I'm very conscious of scaring you."

"Because I have been so easily startled thus far."

"That's just it. I keep thinking, *one more thing and it'll be too much for her. No one can shoulder all of this.* I don't want to frighten you away."

"Where exactly would I go?"

"Just... away." I swallow, glancing downwards, too frightened to watch the reaction of my next words. "You see... I rather like the part of my day with you in it."

"Well, that's... sweet." Rose blinks, as if she cannot believe what I have just uttered. "I'm still mad at you."

"Be mad then," I say. "But just... don't leave." I hate how pitiful that sounds, how much her company means to me, how much I've come to ache for her when she is not around, but that is the truth of the matter. I'd brace the pain of her fury for the balm of her presence.

Rose moves onto a deeper set of slashes, and this time I cannot help but wince.

"Sorry," she says. "It's been a while since I've doctored any wounds like this. Freedom stopped asking me to help because I was too rough with him. He said I did it on purpose."

"Did you?"

"Of course. He was being careless. Someone had to teach him a lesson."

I smile a little at this, wishing I could meet this brother of hers. I'd like to see what Rose is like around others.

"What type of monster is it?" she asks gingerly.

My sigh is bone-deep. I had almost forgotten that we had to speak of this. "It does not have a name. I only know that it comes once a month, during the full moon."

"Has it... always been here?"

I nod, trembling at how close we are to the truth, how much I long to reveal it and can't. *No, no, don't go, don't leave.*

"And it attacks you?"

"Not usually. Usually it minds its own business."

"Will it—"

"It will not hurt you," I say sharply. "I will not let it."

"But—"

“Just... don’t go anywhere near it. Promise me.”

“I... I promise.”

I exhale, not even tensing when she applies the water to a new set of bite marks. She’ll be safe. I’ll keep her safe. And I’ll lock myself away next time. She doesn’t need to be afraid of me.

*You are the one who is most afraid*, says a much darker voice.

Another, much more pleasant voice rises up inside me. Rose, insisting I wasn’t a monster. Insisting she *was* looking at me.

“What do you see?” I ask her, trying to pat down the desperation in my voice.

She blinks. “I’m sorry?”

“You said that you were looking at me, earlier, in the hall. What do you see?”

She pauses for a moment, her gaze unwavering. “You,” she says. “Not a man, not a monster. Just you. Sure, you might have big hands and claws and teeth larger than most, but you are, most categorically, not a monster, as you seem to insist.”

“Then what does a monster look like?”

“Like everyone else,” she tells me. “There is many a monster who wears the form of a man; it is better of the two to have the heart of a man and the form of a monster.”

“You still find me ugly then?”

“I always said you were. Not everyone can be as beautiful as I am.”

How is it that she can make me laugh, even when I’m hurt, and hateful, and despising the world? I barely even notice as she cleans the wounds, the pain dribbling away beneath her touch.

“If you have always been a beast, why should the shape of men matter to you?” she asks.

“I’m sorry?”

“You seem to be quite bothered by the way you look. I’m trying to discover why.”

“I have said this before; most people appear unhappy with their outward appearance.”

“But I’m asking why *you* care.”

I sigh, looking down at my hands, the misshapen, inhuman paws I inhabit. Not mine, not really. Not the body I am meant to have. “I just feel as if my experiences are limited by my form... I want to be able to do the

things that others take for granted. Write neatly. Paint. Ice a cake without it looking ridiculous. I don't... I don't even know what it feels like to have somebody's skin on mine..."

"You can still feel me, can't you?"

"Yes," I whisper, my voice raw with longing. "But not in the way I'd like to."

Rose's face is once again impossible, a white canvas of emotion, but ever-so-slowly, she slides her hand into mine and squeezes my fingers. I thumb hers, sliding the thick pads over her knuckles. I can feel her pressure, her warmth, but not her skin. It's but a thin gruel of sensation.

Rose tugs back her fingers and picks up a roll of bandage. "When I was very little," she says, unravelling it around my arm, "I used to be envious of my sister, Honour. She is so beautiful, and people are drawn to her like flowers move towards the sun. I used to think that if I looked like her, people would be the same towards me. But then my mother said that people have this strange relationship with beauty; they always think it will bring them happiness. She said that that was not the case, and even if true love is fostered between beauty, true love happens but once, and it will find us regardless of how we appear. She said it did not matter if we were not loved by everyone, so long as we are loved by someone."

"I am not sure of what you are saying."

She moves the bandage around my back. "Beauty is subjective, and it does not bring you happiness. Nor does it bring you understanding, companionship... love. It is a lesson I am glad I learnt young. I stopped... I stopped trying to get people to like me. I found enjoyment in being myself. I don't think I became rude or arrogant, but I stopped caring what others thought. If people don't like you for you, then they aren't worth your time. Somewhere, out there, your people are waiting. The ones who will love you unconditionally and irrevocably."

Ariel's voice swims into my mind. *Pick one that doesn't scream at you.* Hadn't she, too, implied something like this? That there would be someone worth waiting for?

I look at her for a long while, wondering how many people she has on her list, how small mine is in comparison. Four, if I am lucky. If they are still alive. "Is your friend, the one who kissed you at the party, one of these people?"



“Firstly,” she replies, smirking, “I kissed *him*. And secondly... no, I don’t think so. James is a dear friend, but... I have been here for months and I have barely spared him a thought since I told you about him last. No, at the moment, those who love me unconditionally and irrevocably are limited to members of my immediate family, and Nanny.”

“You are lucky.”

“To have so many?”

“Yes. And to be so sure of yourself.”

“Do you really care so much about what others think of you?”

“I care about what *you* think.”

She smiles at this, like she’s hiding a secret. “Well, I rather like looking at your face.”

“I’m... I’m sorry?”

“Well, like I said, it’s definitely not pretty, but I still like looking at it.”

“W-what? Why?”

“Because it’s yours,” she says. “The face of a person whose company I have come to enjoy. I mean, my father’s pretty rough around the edges and I still like looking at him.”

I stare at her, utterly perplexed by her words. It is one thing to be indifferent to my appearance, but to actually enjoy it?

I’m not sure I like being compared to her father, though.

Rose places my hand against my chest. “Better?” she asks.

“Hmm? What?”

She taps the bandages. I hadn’t realised she was finished.

“Oh, yes, quite.”

Rose does not remove her hand. She stares at it, her expression unreadable. I have no idea what’s going on inside of her.

And even less so when she leans her head against my chest. “I am really glad you’re all right,” she whispers.

I remember the way she flinched in my arms the day she fell off the dresser. How different this is to that. The only thing the same is how much I don’t want to let her go. Slowly, carefully, my arms encase her. I don’t care about pulling my wounds, I just want to hold her. I want to hold her until my spirit slips out of my body and merges with hers. I want to hold her until the real me peels away and leaves this old casing behind.

It was always going to be her, wasn’t it?

She alone can break my curse.

She alone can kill me.

I think about telling her everything. About Moya, about my mother and the fairies, about what am I. What she is.

*Everything, everything, you're everything.*

But when she gets up and moves towards the door, all I can say is, "Thank you."



*People are drawn to her like flowers move towards the sun.*

It is difficult to imagine that Rose comes from a place where people do not do the same thing to her. I am conscious of what I do, whenever we are in the same room. I cannot help but move closer to her, cannot help but stare at her whenever I am certain she is not looking in my direction. Which is most of the time, alas. She is endlessly comfortable in my presence, at least, I think she is. A few nights ago, she fell asleep beside me so that her head rested in my lap. It is difficult to do that with someone you don't feel comfortable with, but she doesn't move towards me like a flower does the sun. It's more, I think, the way one curls into an old blanket. For warmth, for familiarity. I am swiftly becoming like her family.

I am glad for the fearlessness of her friendship, and the closeness of her companionship, but there are some times when she leans against me that I stiffen like a knife is pressed against my skin. I am so keenly aware of how easy it would be for her to hurt me.

I once asked Grace for advice on how to make someone fall in love with me. It was similar to the fairies' advice. She laughed and told me to be myself. I told her I'd tried that.

"Then be patient," she responded. "There is always someone who will love you for you."

It is a lot easier to say that when it's a lot easier to meet people.

The advice is similar to what Rose has told me. I wonder if they are from the same village, if this is the sort of thing they teach them in that part of the world. None of the other girls spouted similar doctrine.

It seems unlikely. I've never known the castle to pick up two visitors from the same place.

I lie my head against the pillow as I struggle to sleep.

"I could really do with some advice right now," I sigh.

There is a loud crack from the fireplace, too loud for a mere log. A spark of colour. "Ariel?" My heart sings with expectation. I'm frightened of hoping too much. I must be mistaken—

Another crack. An educated guess; it was either Ariel or Margaret. Ophelia was not one to offer advice. Margaret was less likely to waste her magic.

"You should use your magic sparingly," I suggest, my chest tight. This is the first time I have heard any whisper of them in almost two years. They did not last long after I drained the garden to send Grace home to her fiancé.

Two very loud cracks, like hisses.

"Thank you," I whisper, ignoring the prickle in my eyes. "Although I don't know what help you can offer me like this."

The fireplace falls mute. Perhaps I have offended her. Then, a few seconds later, a book drops in front of me. A romance novel.

"Really, Ariel?"

The fireplace spits. This is a lot of magic she is using up, especially with the summoning. I should not encourage her, but I am too thankful for the company to chastise her now. It's possible they are regaining some of their magic, with life returning to the castle. I dare to hope.

"I've missed you," I say to her, or maybe the air, I am not sure.

Silence fills the room once more.



## ROSE



What a collection of secrets this place holds, what aged whispers haunt the corridors. Who is this creature that stalks the halls? Who is the face that haunts my nightmares? And why is Thorn, a person with a noble heart made to wear the form of a monster, condemned to live here shackled to the shadows and the stone?

My head spins with thoughts that stir me in and out of sleep. Who is Thorn indeed. He lies to me, or avoids telling the truth, and yet there is a goodness in him that far outweighs my own. Can a liar be a good person? Can I care for someone who keeps me in the dark?

*That depends upon the reason.*

But what reason could be good enough? That I care for him is certain. He has stitched his way into my skin with a finality that frightens me far more than the secrets of this place. But though I trust him to protect me, and trust that he cares for me, I do not trust that he is honest, and thus there is a limit to my affections.

*Perhaps that is for the best, I reason. It will make it all the easier when you leave in three months' time.*

Three months' time. I am halfway through.



The following morning, I introduce Thorn to the pup. I have decided to call him Bramble, much to Thorn's amusement.

"Because I found him in a bramble patch!" I insist.

"Of course. I suppose we'll have a cat called Briar soon, maybe a bird called Fern... how about a fish called Petal?"

"I am not calling anything Petal," I hiss. "Least of all, a fish! And you're teasing me."

"I will admit it is swiftly becoming one of my favourite past times."

I punch him on the arm, and he winces, making my stomach twist guiltily. He's still wounded, but he's rebuffed any further offers of help. I sense he feels like he deserves his injuries for keeping me in the dark, and although I want to tell him that I don't agree, there hasn't been an opening for such a confession.

And maybe I'm still carrying residual anger, too.

*He lies to you*, a voice reminds me.

But I'm determined not to be cross today, and I turn back to Bramble. The introduction is somewhat limited, as he is still refusing to come out from underneath my bed. We pass him bits of food which he snatches from our fingers before scuttling back to his den, whilst we flick through a book on canines, trying to identify his breed. We decide he is mixed, and no older than six months.

Bramble's arrival offers us a new pastime: house training. It is quite clear that wherever he has come from, he did not live with people. It takes a few days of passing him food under the bed before he accepts us as part of his pack, but convincing him of the difference between outside and in is trickier. As he sleeps with me, morning duty is mine, and Thorn takes him out in the evening. Sometimes, I watch them from my window, walking through the gardens in the low evening sun. Every so often, Thorn will drop down on all fours and the two will chase each other like puppies. Then Thorn will look up to my window, and see me sitting there. He'll stop and wave, and continue the game with renewed enthusiasm.

He looks up to my window a lot, I notice.

“Where do you think he came from?” I ask Thorn one day, as Bramble chases a bee through a bush.

“I don’t know,” replies Thorn. “It’s possible he came through the gateway.”

“I thought it only opened twice a year?”

“It usually does, but sometimes tiny holes can open up—small enough for birds, or insects...”

“Or a medium-sized puppy?”

“Precisely. Not large enough for a human, I fear.”

It takes me a little while to realise what he is talking about. He is assuming I am thinking of escape. Wondering if Bramble managed to get in, I can get out.

I do not admit to him I have become less concerned with the days. Sometimes a week will pass before I remember to check it off. Although I am keeping track of the moon. Nineteen more days until the monster’s return. I have asked Thorn little about it since he first admitted its existence, partly because I didn’t want to have another argument, and partly because I am a little afraid of it. Everything else in the castle exists at all times. Even the wolves, I know, lurk in the woodlands during the day. But the monster seems to come out of nowhere.

Its likeness to Thorn has not escaped me. I think about the fairy stories of old, the idea of darkness and light. Is it some demonic cousin of his, his opposite? Are they the same species? I have read the Fey book now from back to front, but I can find nothing in its pages that resembles Thorn, nothing that comes close. The little snatches of his past I can gather shed little illumination. His parents are dead, but he remembers his mother. There have been visitors before me, but none of great importance. He has not always been alone here, and yet he feels as if he has.

I have the strangest urge to take his hand, whenever I remember these words of his. I want him to know that he is not alone now, that neither of us are, but I do not. This is but a respite from his loneliness, and soon I will vanish from his side.

I try not to think about this too often, but it haunts the shadows of thought at the back of my mind.



Rain comes to the castle. For a period of almost three days, we are caught in a torrential downpour. Rivers stream from the skies. Silver coats the garden.

I know I should be happy for the rain; the plants need it. But a coldness comes with this weather, and the sun is hidden behind a sheath of water. I miss the warmth, the smell of flowers, the long walks. The rain makes me restless.

I spend some time in the music room, trying to compose, but everything I create sounds angry or sad or melancholy. My fingers eke out only tragic notes, my voice struggles with joy.

I wander around the castle instead. There is little I haven't explored yet, but any change of scenery is welcome. I return to the hall of mirrors I visited during my first week. It is a strange place: thirteen mirrors wrap around the golden chamber, covering almost every surface of the room. The mirror at the end, larger and grander than any of the others, is obscured by a black sheet. The curious part of me longs to remove it, but when I approach, there is a cold hum behind the sheath that warns me to stay away.

I turn my attention to the other mirrors instead. I wonder what their purpose is. Was this some kind of vanity room, where nobles would come to see themselves reflected a thousand times from a thousand different angles? Was it some kind of status play, a symbol of wealth and privilege? I veer towards the one beside the black mirror. As I move closer, the glass ripples and my reflection fades away. In its place is water, deep and dark. It is like I am lying at the bottom of the lake. Tiny pinpricks of light glimmer far, far above me. I can almost feel the pressure of the water against my chest. Hard, aching, overwhelming.

I shudder.

The minute I step away, the image vanishes. I return to the frame. It is then I notice that the mirror is titled. Beneath the glass, in miniscule writing, is a single word. *Fear*.

I call for Thorn.

“What?” he cries. “What is it?”

“The mirror,” I stammer. “It... it doesn’t show my face. It showed me—”

“They’re working again?” Thorn’s eyes light up.

“They’re *working*?”

“The Hall of Mirrors,” he says, by way of explanation. “Each one has the ability to show you something different. What you desire most, who you really are, what you fear—”

“I’m acquainted with that one,” I say, pointing numbly.

Thorn looks a little guilty. “I’m sorry. What did you see?”

“Water,” I reply, “deep, deep water.”

“The lake?”

I nod. “I’ve never liked deep water. I don’t like... not knowing what’s beneath the surface, or not having my feet on the ground, or being out of my depth.” I stiffen just thinking about it. “What do you see?”

Thorn takes a step back, involuntarily, I think. “I’d rather not see it with my eyes.”

He must know exactly what it is already. I wonder if it shows you only one thing. There are so many things I fear, if I think hard enough. Water is relatively mild.

“Now this one,” Thorn says much more jovially, pulling me to a different mirror, “I think you’ll really enjoy. This mirror will show you anything in the world, anything real and living.” He points to a little engraving at the top. *The present*. “It can show you your family, if you like.”

There is nothing in the world I want more. “How does it work?”

“Just step up to the glass, and ask it. You have to ask this one—there is too much in the world for it to show you otherwise.”

I move eagerly towards the frame. “Show me my father,” I ask. The mirror swirls like ink, then suddenly there is a crystal-clear image of my father, sitting in his study. I gasp. It is like I am there. My fingers press against the glass. It’s cold.

Papa looks older than I remember, but the study is just the same. The same faded books and weathered globe. The dried flowers that only I ever replaced. The same pipe. I can almost smell the tobacco. He coughs. I can hear him!

“Show me Beau.”



The mirror swirls again. Beau is in the garden, surrounded by flowers, playing with his little toy soldiers. Hope is sitting on the swing nearby, and Freedom is in the background, target practising against a tree. They all look happy, carefree.

“Show me Honour.” Honour is in a parlour I don’t recognise, a little nicer than ours, just as cosy. I find our clock on the mantelpiece, and spot a vase on a nearby table that used to be Mama’s. She is gazing out of the window, knitting contentedly. Just then, Charles comes into the room, leans down and kisses her, and sits down in the chair opposite. Golden wedding bands gleam on their fingers.

“She’s married,” I whisper.

“What’s that?” Thorn is at my elbow.

“My sister, Honour, she’s married.”

Somehow, Thorn knows immediately where my mind has gone, and he sighs. “I’m sorry you missed it. Time does not always flow so perfectly between this world and that one; a part of me hoped you would be home before they missed you—”

I startle. “I’m sorry? Time flows differently between worlds, and you didn’t think to mention it when I arrived?”

Thorn hangs his head. “I did think to mention it,” he replies. “But with so little magic left in this place when you arrived, I knew that was highly unlikely to be the case this time. It would have been a false hope I was giving you. I do like to limit the falsehoods between us.”

*There should be no falsehoods*, I think bitterly, but I try to swallow my anger. He was right, after all.

“How do you know time flows differently?” I ask, as tonelessly as I can manage.

Thorn looks down. “I’ve been known to look in on my previous visitors, every now and again,” he admits. “Just to see... that they’re all right.”

There is a guiltiness to this confession, more so than simply spying on them. “I can understand your wanting to make sure they returned home safely,” I tell him.

“It’s not that,” he says. “I just want to know... that being here didn’t hurt them.”

It’s then that I recall he was not friends with most of his previous visitors. Six months for them would be much more isolating, much more damaging, if they remained strangers all this time.

“It isn’t your fault they come here,” I say, but I struggle with making my words soft. My family has been so long without me. What have I put them through? Yet... my siblings all looked happy enough. And Papa... well, he did look older, but he has never really been happy. I hope he’s all right.

Thorn seems to sense my distress. “Would you like to see something else?” he offers. “That one will show you whatever your heart desires, and that one will show you—”

“Why is that one covered?” I ask, pointing to the one at the centre.

“It’s broken,” Thorn replies quickly. “’Tis bad luck to have a broken mirror uncovered.”

“What did it used to show?”

He pauses. “Nothing worth seeing again.”

A chill passes between us. Another restriction, I fear, but this one I feel I can live with. I do not want to know what lurks behind the surface of that glass. “A mirror of desires?” I pipe up. “Lost many hours in front of that?”

“Too many,” Thorn admits.

“What did it show you?”

“A very personal question,” he starts to smirk at me. “Why don’t you step in front of it, and tell me what it shows you?”

“No!” I rush. I cannot help but wonder what it would show me, but I am too afraid to look myself, let alone have Thorn see it. I point to another. “And that one?”

“That is the Mirror of Remembrance—any one that’s passed. Then there’s the Mirror of Truth—”

“The Mirror of Truth?” I stop him. “What does that show?”

He swallows. “That one shows you for who you really are.”

The thought intrigues me, so I immediately step in front of it. I am disappointed with the result; I look just the same. “Do I look any different to you?” I ask.

Thorn laughs lightly. “You always look the same to me.”

“You have a go.”

His face drops. “No,” he says. “I cannot.”

“You can’t?”

“I do not wish to see it.”

“Haven’t you ever... aren’t you curious?”

“I am not sure I would like what it would show me.”

He thinks he will see a monster.

“Could you not step in front of it for my sake? You can close your eyes!”

Thorn sighs. “You know I would do anything, for your sake.”

He closes his eyes obediently, and holds out his hands to be led. Gently, I lead him forward, and place him next to me in the frame. Try as I might, a little gasp escapes me when I see our reflections, standing side by side, hand in hand.

“What?” asks Thorn.

“You should open your eyes.”

He turns his head, just enough to face me, but still avoiding his reflection. “I would much rather see myself through yours,” he says.

“I see what I already see.” I lean up on the tips of my toes, pull his face to mine, and touch our noses together. Our breath mingles. “I see that you are beautiful.”



The Mirrors were once my window to everything—from learning about the world outside to the secrets of my own past. I spent hours in front of it, travelling the world. I journeyed to scorching deserts and frozen mountains, to undersea palaces and castles above the clouds. I went wherever I wished, saw everything I desired. I learned about my ancestors, and my parents.

I watched what felt like every memory of my father's in the mirror, trying to get to know him, each moment of his existence relived behind the glass. I saw him as a little boy, in the town he lived in. He had two doting parents—my grandparents—and two brothers and two sisters. I knew from the way that time moved outside of the fairy realm that they had died long before I could ever hope to meet them. Sometimes, when I was bored, I would look up what had happened to them, after my father left. He had managed to get a message to them; of course he had. My mother had magic enough to spare, then. He told them that he had gone travelling and fallen in love. They were sad, of course, that they never saw him again, but they believed he was happy. They moved on with their lives, as did he.

My favourite memory of my father's is when my mother told him she was expecting me. They had been together ten years by this point, and thought children between them impossible. The minute she told him, he dropped down to his knees, held her tightly, and began to cry.

He never lived to hold me, but he knew that I was a boy. Fairies always know of such things. I loved watching him and mother dream of the future they had for me together, even if that future never came to be. It was proof that he was a father, *my* father, that he would have loved me. I didn't mourn too much, what never was.

Not too much.

The one thing the mirrors cannot show you is the future. Mother told me that is because the future was unset, but I know from people like Grace and the books on the Fey that our world is peppered with hints of things to come. Some are more certain than others. Grace could always predict the weather or tell where animals would be in the garden, but other things were less certain, no matter how sure she sometimes sounded.

"I'm going to marry Henry, and we're going to be very happy together, and have several children."

"Hmm," I said, stroking my chin, "I believe they call that wishful thinking. Although, I will wish for it with you."

She dug me in the ribs. "You'll have that too, one day."

"Thank you," I returned, not really believing it. "If only dear Henry wasn't already taken."

Grace laughed. "You know what I mean."

"I do."

"I know you think it won't happen."

"You're right."

"But it will. You are a lot easier to love than you think."

I wish I believed her, but after being ignored, scorned, and screamed at by almost all of my previous guests, it seemed an impossible dream.

Felicity was good to me, and I was half in love with her, but my heart did not break when she left. We had six months together. She was my friend. I admired her tenacious spirit and her joy of life. But she did not seep into my soul in the way that Rose has, so that the parting, the untangling of her from my side, is certain to break me.

I have to make her fall in love with me.

Rose is quiet for the next few days, and strangely disinterested in the mirrors, which is odd, but gives me time to sit in front of them and ask to see people courting, to observe the rituals with renewed vigour. There's a lot of walking and spending time together, which we already do. I need something different...

I get so wrapped up in my research that I'm frequently late to dinner, and I'm only half-sure I believe Rose when she says, "It's all right." I sense something else is bothering her. There's something sad about the way she strokes Bramble's ears under the table. It's something about the mirrors themselves, the reason she hasn't returned to them.

"Are you upset that your family didn't seem to be missing you?" I ask one evening.

Rose looks down. "It's foolish—"

"It isn't." Everyone wants someone to miss them. "I'm sure they were devastated at the time. People don't always show their grief."

"I'm awful for wanting them to be hurt."

"I don't think it's awful to want to be missed." I pause. "I'll miss you, when you leave." *For the few seconds it takes my heart to break. Rose, I will miss you so much I'll die from it.*

Rose looks up at me. "I'll miss you, too," she says, almost imperceptibly.

It's not quite 'I love you', but my heart hammers anyway. No one has ever missed me before, that I know of.

Although apparently Grace's spirit—if indeed that's what visits me during the night—cares enough to come back and offer me advice. That's hardly nothing, if it's real.

I have a tendency not to believe in good things, so I'm reluctant to believe in her.

The next day, I leave the mirrors alone, take Rose out in a boat on the lake, and dine with her on the terrace. I suggest cuisines from countries she has dreamed of visiting, exotic delicacies and foreign extravagances. Each meal becomes an exercise in flavour, a feast for the senses. We eat everywhere; on the balcony, beside the lake, in the gardens, by the fountain. I make my own additions to the grounds based on things she's spoken of: a rock garden filled with lavender and a swing like I saw her sister on in the mirror. Knowing her wistfulness for her nanny's home-cooked pies, we harvest fruit together from the orchard and bake dozens of wonky, bursting monstrosities, which taste a lot better than they look and pair beautifully with sunsets, mulled wine and fine company.

I convince her to return to the Hall of Mirrors and set up a cold, buffet-style supper, pulling in several rugs and cushions, and request one of the mirrors show us a play. It is a miraculous thing to behold, and we lose

hours in front of it, soaking up our favourite stories coming to life, and discussing how we would have done it differently if we were directing.

Rose is amazed. “You didn’t... you didn’t spy on my childhood, did you?”

“The mirrors would never show me what you would not allow me to see,” I explain, a little hurt that she thinks I’d break her privacy like that. “Why? What gave you that impression?”

“The food I’ve always wanted to eat... the swing like the one I have at home... the plays I adore... I thought you might have gotten the ideas from watching me.”

“You’ve mentioned the swing before,” I explain. “And I know you love the idea of travelling. I cannot take you to other places, but I thought the cuisine might appeal. As for the plays, you are very forthcoming with your preferences there—” I stop. Rose is looking at me intensely. “What is it?”

“That’s... that’s... thank you,” she mutters, as if the words can’t quite convey how she feels.

I know, in that moment, I’ve moved her, at least in some way. Her gratitude warms the pit of me. “You’re welcome.”

She swallows, and diverts her eyes around the room. “What were you looking at then, if not my life?”

“Inspiration, mostly,” I admit. “Things to do to... entertain you.” *To court you.*

I am not sure she understands this.

Maybe I should have said, ‘court’.

Rose turns back to the performance playing in the mirror before us, and rests her head against my shoulder. My heart beats so furiously I’m surprised she can’t hear it. I wonder if I should put my arm around her. I *want* to put my arm around her. I want to put it there and never let go.

“I’ve missed this,” she says quietly.

“Watching plays?”

“Being close to someone.” Her voice is soft as ember. “You know,” she adds, “being physically close to someone. Like my sisters, for instance.”

I am not sure I want to be compared to her sisters, but I’m also not sure that’s what she means at all. And I’m flattered she wants to be so close to me.

I laugh. “Ah, Rose, you truly know how to compliment a man!”

Rose's mouth freezes into a smile, and she leans forward and kisses my cheek. She smells of earth and ash and firelight.

"What was that for?" I ask, struggling to keep my voice steady. I'm glad my fur hides what is doubtless a blush rising to my cheeks.

Rose smiles, climbing to her feet. "If you have to ask, you shall never know." She twirls towards the door.

"But... where are you going?"

"An evening walk," she announces. "Are you coming?"

As if I could ever say no. I feel like I could follow this girl to the ends of the earth.



That night, I dream of Grace again. She meets me in the sunset-covered gardens, her face beaming.

"She kissed you," she says.

I rub my cheek, feeling flesh, not fur, the weight of Rose's lips somehow crawling into the dream with me.

"That wasn't quite a kiss."

"Oh? Did you not enjoy it?"

"Of course I enjoyed it... and you're teasing me."

"It's terrific fun."

A vision of Rose appears before us, tending to the gardens. Grace watches with a rapture similar to mine. A dream. This must be. Only a dream.

"She likes you," Grace says.

"I believe that much. But it's not enough."

"She knows you're keeping something from her. She can't let go until then."

I sigh. "You're a very pleasant manifestation of my conscience."

"I can be unpleasant, if you think that'll work better?"

I scoff. "Now you sound like Ariel."

Grace shakes her head. "You really need to start listening."

The garden—and the dream—fades to black.





I ponder on Grace's words all the way to the next full moon, waiting for the chance to explain to Rose, the right words, the right moment. I wish I could write them down, but I can't, so I pace in front of the mirrors instead.

The rehearsals make me feel sick.

I plan another evening down by the lake, the night before. Rose is in a good mood, having just finished the last in the series of books she's been reading for seven days straight, and found it utterly perfect. She's carrying the conversation entirely by herself and has no idea of my nerves. Finally, she finishes her de-construction and drops down in a contented sigh, placing her head in my lap.

"Today has been perfect," she murmurs.

I'm in no mood to spoil it for her, so I give her a few moments of peace, stroking back her hair. I tug at one of the curls and distract myself in the way it springs back into place. Beautiful. Wondrous.

"Rose?"

"Hmm?"

I stroke her hair a little longer, not looking at the face pressed against my leg.

"The... the last thing I want to do is frighten you, but you need to know, that monster you saw in the grounds? It's me. Well, not me, but a version of myself. The version I should be. This is hard to explain, but I'm... I'm still me. I promise. I wouldn't hurt you. I'd die before then. Oh, Rose, I'm muddling this all up, see—"

I glance down to gauge her reaction so far, but she's immobile, her eyes closed.

She's asleep.

I sigh, shifting her into my arms, and carry her back to the castle.

It is almost impossible to let her go.



Cowardice grips me the next morning. I try to distract Rose with more walks and thrills and plays, but it does little to elevate my own mood. I am restless and lethargic all in one. Even Bramble seems to sense that something is amiss. He skirts around me all day, hiding behind Rose.

I've never had a dog before. There weren't any in here when the castle was abandoned. We had some cats, though. When the gardens started to wane, they did too, as if they couldn't survive without the rodents and insects, no matter what I fed them. I tried to encourage them to leave, to find scattered holes in the gateway, and one by one all of them did. All except my favourite, Raven. She stayed until the end, growing weaker and weaker, staying by my side long after the fairies' voices had fallen quiet.

Then one morning I woke and found her next to me in the nest, stiff and cold as ice.

I buried her beneath the rosebushes, speaking a few words to her silent form.

It was the last time I spoke out loud for weeks, no longer certain there was anyone to listen.

I rub Bramble's ears, thinking of her. She was never frightened of my change.

"I'm still me," I whisper to him, when Rose is distracted. "I won't hurt you. Or her."

I'm still me.

*Still a liar, you mean?*

Rose takes a long, solitary walk and tends to the garden. I watch her trying to teach Bramble to fetch, but to little avail. He prefers to hoard his sticks. Back inside, she fidgets with a tablecloth she's making for our parlour, tidies and sweeps even though the room could not be cleaner. I read out passages from my latest book, and we make polite and awkward conversation.

"I think we should try and start measuring Bramble," Rose remarks. "He's getting so big, and it's only been a month!"

She's right, but I can't think of much to say about that.

"Perhaps we should throw him a party, next."

I mumble something non-committal, conscious of gathering darkness.

We retire early to our chambers.

"Please lock your door tonight," I plead.

"Promise me you won't go outside."

I swallow. "I can't... I can't promise that. If I think you're in danger... I may act rashly." I'm laying the grounds for another lie, and I hate it, playing the hero when I'm clearly the villain.

"And what if I think you're in danger?"

I wish I could smile at that. I wish I could take any kind of joy from it. *Dear, sweet Rose. I am not worth protecting.* "No more taking on monsters for my sake," I tell her. "You promised. Stay away from it, whatever you see. Whatever you hear."

She nods slowly, and closes the door behind me, white-faced and whisper-soft.

I make my way down to the cell with plenty of time, undressing slowly and folding my clothes on the table outside. I lock myself in and lie down, waiting. The only thing I haven't removed is Rose's necklace. I hold the thorn in lieu of her.

I long for voices again, for anything to pierce the silence, to disrupt the gathering darkness as it thickens around me, uncoiling that old, familiar pain.

You really would think I would be used to it by now.

At least, this time, I don't have to worry about not screaming. I throw back my head and howl.



## ROSE



The shadows clash like the sound of steel, as if the darkness has become a tangible thing. I know I must have been dreaming, and for a moment, I think I still am. The room is filled with slippery smog, and yet the shadows have edges.

Bramble growls. Something hisses back. My breath stills in my chest.

“Hello?” I whisper. “Who’s there?”

I pray for the quiet tinkling of the castle sprites, but there is nothing but gloom. Swallowing, I creep out of bed. I can hear something—a buzzing, scratching sound. Not a pleasant hum, like the touch of the sprites, something more mechanical.

A horrid scrape pieces the darkness, like a nail on glass. Bramble snarls.

That’s when I see her. The monstrous, pale face, the cruel mouth, wide open and laughing. Her laugh splinters silence, splinters the air, splinters against my spine. Her red lips cackle from the mirror.

A scream rips through the castle.

*Thorn.*

I dash for the door. The sprites appear out of nowhere, furiously tapping my hands as I yank at the handle and spill out into the corridor. The laugh carries on. She is everywhere, in all the mirrors, in every gleaming surface. I have to get away from her. I have to find Thorn.

He is not in his room, but this does not surprise me. I can hear him in the gardens. I know I shouldn't be able to, but the noise he is making is so loud, so awful, that it reverberates through the stone.

"Thorn!"

I wrench open the castle door and flee into the darkness. Moonlight dusts the surface of every statue. The shadows are silvery.

"Thorn!"

The screaming is closer. Oh God, what is happening to him? He sounds as if he is being ripped apart. I'm going to need a weapon. There is a crypt nearby, guarded by suits of armour with swords of steel. I pry one loose, desperately trying to remember everything Freed ever taught me about wielding a blade.

Newly armed, the weight of the rusty weapon tugging at my arm, I follow the noise back into the grounds.

"Thorn, where are you?"

There is a faint light from another tomb, one I have never been into. I think it used to be barred. I am drawn to it before he screams again.

It isn't a tomb. It's a dungeon. Cells line the walls, filled with leaves, moss, tree roots. It has lain abandoned for some time. A glowing candlestick sits on a nearby table. Underneath it lies a pile of clothes in a heap. They are unmistakably Thorn's.

The screams sound more like howls now. I grab the candlestick and head off down the passageway, the noises growing louder and louder, more and more wretched. Finally, I see a cell at the end, wrapped in chains. Behind the bars is a large, dark shape.

"Thorn?"

A low groan sounds back.

Who could have locked him in here? The monster? I don't stop to ask, I don't wait for an answer; I am already dropping the sword and tugging at the chains. The little sprites return, beating furiously against my chest with feeble strength. I swat them away.

"Leave me alone! I'm trying to help him!"

They don't stop. Their efforts increase as I grab a set of keys lying nearby and slide them into the lock. Their buzzing gets louder.

I swing open the door and step into the cell. "Thorn?"

No reply. I stoop to light a nearby candle, banishing a fraction of the gloom. "Are you hurt?"

Slowly, the large form turns to face me. It's not Thorn. It's some monster, similar to him in size and shape. It has the same black fur, the same limbs, the same tail and teeth and claws. But its face belongs to a monster. Its face is twisted and ravenous, red-eyed. Hateful.

It is not Thorn. It cannot be.

The monster emits a low growl, and lunges forwards.

I scream, throwing the candlestick in its face as I break towards the door. I kick the bars closed, snatch up the sword, and hurtle back up the passageway. I gained a few seconds with the candle and the door. I gain a few more slamming the dungeon shut, but I can't see a way to bar it. The castle is my only shelter, creature in the mirror or not.

I'm still screaming for Thorn. He must have locked that thing away. He must be nearby. Why doesn't he answer me?

I reach the castle, the monster close at my heels, its claws slicing through the hem of my nightgown. I fly through the door, dropping my sword as I turn to slam it shut, but the creature's arm is wedged in the narrow space.

In the commotion, I see something awful. Something impossible.

Spitting against the monster's chest is a rosewood thorn on a leather string.

No.

The sprites are back again, furiously pushing against the door with me. One of them goes straight into its face, stabbing its tiny body against the monster's eyes. I hear it yowl in pain.

*Him.* I hear *him* yowl in pain.

I scream. "I don't want to hurt you!"

He continues to wrestle against the door. I pick up the sword and swipe at his hand. Blood splatters the floor. He cries out again, withdrawing his hand. I use the moment to dash for the stairs.

I've just reached the landing when the doors fling open. In three leaps, he is at the top, cutting across my path. I hurl the sword in his direction and stream down the one way still left to me, knocking over suits of

armour, stone busts, whatever I can. A piece of debris catches my ankle and I slam against the floor, twisting around just in time to see him towering over me. Red eyes sink into my skin. I raise my arms to cover the blow I'm sure is coming, when out of nowhere Bramble comes flying. His teeth clamp around his master's arms.

Thorn barely registers the pain, flinging our dog aside as if he were no more nuisance than a fly.

"Bramble!"

He is up again with barely a whimper, this time going for the leg. One of the sprites flies past my cheek. I scramble upright and race down the corridor, hitting the door of the forbidden chamber. It's locked. The sprite flees into the keyhole, the other two still trying to delay Thorn. They cut down a chandelier. Glass explodes onto the floor. Bramble is lying whimpering in the corner.

The lock clicks open. I rush inside, slamming it shut. The little sprite dashes back through, locking it again.

Thorn pounds against the door. I am not sure it will hold him. A great big wardrobe stands a few feet away. It's leaden, but the sprites stream in and somehow the four of us manage to tip it. There's a table too. An armchair. I heave both across the room. The sprites are gone. The pounding gets lighter, quieter, less frequent. Perhaps they are distracting him. Perhaps he is getting tired. Perhaps I wounded him more than I thought.

*Him.* The monster is Thorn.

Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't I *know*? I saw how similar they were, but the truth is as simple as it is shocking: I could not imagine Thorn as that thing. I stopped seeing him as anything but him a long time ago.

As my breath calms, and my heart subsides, I realise how cold it is in this chamber. There's an ice in the air, a frostiness that I had forgotten that once inhabited every corner of the castle. I spot a hearth, unlit, and set to work making a fire. The embers only make the shadows more prominent, and I'm in no mood for shadows. I move around the room, lighting every candle I can find, vanquishing whatever darkness I can.

A luxurious suite peels out of the darkness, gold and white and marble. It is far grander than any of the other rooms in the castle. Far dustier, too. A large, full-length mirror stands beside the fireplace, and opposite is a painting of a beautiful woman. The brushwork is so exquisite that her

gown almost ripples, and her dark hair shines as though caught in the sun. She is proud and flawless, but there is a kindness to her face. I have no doubt that this is the person Thorn was talking to several weeks ago, the person he claimed to have lost... but who is she? There is no name on the gilded frame.

There is one other curious thing about the room. Next to the bed is a broken cradle, one side of it completely torn away. The blankets, stiff with dust and age, have been ripped to shreds. What happened to this occupant? Is this... is this woman someone Thorn loved and lost, a long time ago? Was it... was it possible they had a child together? And the claw marks...

No, it didn't bear thinking about. I couldn't imagine Thorn as a father, and I don't think he's much older than I. This crib had been abandoned for years.

I am not so sure my theory about the woman is incorrect, however. I have heard him talking to her image. What had he said?

*I'm not sure I could survive losing you both.*

Thorn is still prowling outside. He's stopped pounding, but I can still hear him growling, can hear the hot, angry spurts of breath, the clinking of claw on marble.

Beside the crib is a little music box. Not a magic one, like the one we used for our party, just a perfectly ordinary box. It plays a simple lullaby when I wind it up, one that reminds me of a tune my mother used to sing. I cannot quite remember the words. Something about home and the heart.

I place it on the table next to the fireplace. I'm not sure I can hope to sleep, but the song is soothing. Even he sounds quieter than he was before.

I find myself incapable of disturbing the pristine bed, or any part of this shrine more than I already have, so I find a blanket inside a dresser and wrap myself up in it.

The little sprites wander through the keyhole, skimming the floor like dying dragonflies. They are so faint that their lights are flickering. When I scoop them up, they barely move at all.

"Thank you," I whisper. "I know why you tried to stop me now. I'm sorry I didn't listen."

They are absolutely mute. I do not know what good it will do, but I lie them down on the rug beside the glowing fire. I wind up the music box again and douse the other lights before crawling onto the hearth beside them. I try to remember the words to the tune.



*“Home is the sweetest of places...”* I forget the next bit, forget most of all it aside from the final line. I sing it to the darkness, praying that he can hear me too, wherever he is. *“You are safe, I am here, this is home.”*



The stars are talking, twinkling against the ink-blue ceiling. I think I have heard them before, though the precise memory escapes me.

“Six others have come before her, and not a single one has ever ventured out of their room for any of the nights,” the childlike voice squeaks.

“Which either makes her very brave, or very stupid,” the matronly one retorts.

The third—my favourite—is succinct, matter-of-fact. “She left because she cared.”

“Silly girl doesn’t know what’s good for her.”

“Whose side are you on, exactly?”

“I’d just rather see her gone than dead.”

“You know what will happen if she goes.”

“It’s never happened so far.”

“He has never loved any of them before.”

The door clicks open, and I awaken on the rug in front of the fire. I have no confusion about how I came here. I remember everything about the night with perfect, frightening clarity.

The furniture has already been pulled away, and I can see Thorn curled up right outside the door. Bramble is beside him, licking the wounds he inflicted the night before.

Thorn says nothing as I exit the room, does not move or even acknowledge me, until I am standing beside him. “Please tell me I didn’t hurt you,” he begs, not looking at me. “Just tell me that.”

I take the blanket from my shoulders and drape it over him. He’s completely naked, his flesh torn and shredded in places. I know I should be angry at him. He has lied to me. He has unconsciously put me in danger. But in this moment, I completely understand.

He was ashamed. He was afraid. I cannot do anything but pity him.

I crouch down beside him and he stiffens at the closeness, then begins to tremble. He curls inwards, and I think he might be crying.

“I’m not hurt,” I say, as solidly as I can. I touch the back of his hand, where last night’s wound pulses angrily. “I am sorry about your hand. You’ll have to let me bandage it.”

“As long as you’re all right—”

“I am not all right,” I say firmly. “I said I was unhurt, not all right.”

Thorn slowly moves into a sitting position. He still avoids my gaze, but I see his cheeks are damp. “I would sooner die than let any harm come to you.”

“I know. I know you would.”

“If you had only stayed in your room—”

“No! No, Thorn, I am not a child! You cannot shut me away! I came out looking for you because I did not know. If you had only told me—”

“I did not want you to know that I was a monster—”

“You are not a monster!”

“There is an equal measure of despair and delight I feel at your utterance of those words, but I assure you Rose, once a month I truly do shed any semblance of humanity.”

“Well, once a month I’m not that much fun to be around either.”

Thorn looks at me like he wants to laugh, but is either too exhausted or too frightened to. “Why did you come out last night?”

Now it is my turn to be frightened. “There... there was a face in the mirror,” I admit. “The same face from the lake. The horrible, twisted face. I ran out to find you and... I heard you screaming.”

“You can’t possibly have heard me all the way—”

“But I did.”

Thorn looks at me blankly, taking this in.

“This face I saw...” I continue. “She’s the dark fairy, isn’t she? The one who started the war, brought ruin on the fairy people, and was trapped here as a result.”

Thorn prickles. “She ought to be dead by now,” he says. “Or as powerless as a ghost. But somehow she still clings to life. A dark remnant of her former self, imprisoned in this castle. Just like I am.”

He whispers the last part, and suddenly I have a horrible idea. “Are you... are you like her?” The words cut against my throat. It cannot be. “Is that why you look—”

Thorn cannot look me in the eyes. "I am one of her creations," he admits. "A monster she made to inflict misery on her enemies. I should be... what you saw last night. That is the way I am supposed to be, but for the mercy of the fairy queen."

"The lady in the portrait," I realise, my eyes drifting back through the chamber door. I do not ask why I was not allowed to go in there, why he treats the place like a shrine. I am afraid to. "All right."

"You don't seem... surprised by all this."

"I live in an enchanted castle."

"Yes, quite. Well, the castle is under a curse."

"Oh my, do you really think so?"

Thorn glares. "I am trying to be serious here, Rose."

"Sorry."

"I told you once that this place was a prison," he continues. "I don't think I explained for whom. You see, after the great battle was fought, the Queen of the Fairies, fearing for the lives of her people, cast them out into the realm of men, and imprisoned those who fought against her within the walls of the castle. She then gave up her own life to ensure that was where they remained. But over the years, her endeavours drained all magic from all lands, and placed a curse upon the place she once called home."

"What... what happens when the curse is broken?"

"Life returns to the castle. The lights regain their forms. Magic is free to walk the world once more."

"And... the shadows?"

"They die, hopefully."

"And... you?"

"What about me?"

"You turn into a monster once a month," I say placidly. "We haven't yet talked about why that is."

Thorn sighs. "The Queen, she... she made me what I am. Human on the inside, save for one night a month when dark magic is at its peak."

"Why?"

"Sorry?"

"Why did she save you, if you were one of the dark fairy's creations?"

Thorn is very quiet for a moment. "You know, I've often asked myself the same question." His tone is bitter. "You've seen my true form now. Do you see now, why I told you I was a monster?"

I am petrified of my next question. “Have you ever hurt anyone?”

Thorn swallows. “Yes,” he replies. “I’ve never killed anyone, thank heavens. But yes, I’ve wounded them. Never willingly, never wantingly, always apologetically... but I still did it. It never mattered to me that I had no choice, that I couldn’t help it. Only a monster could do what I did.”

“Only a monster could do that and *not care*.” My words do not seem to be enough to convince him that I cannot, will not, ever agree with him. He is no more monster than I am. At least, on most days. “How is the curse broken?” I ask, when Thorn says nothing in response.

“The details are a little... hazy. It was said that only a young woman, fierce in soul and fair of heart, could break it. Every time the gateway opens, it has pulled in another maiden.”

“And... and what is she supposed to do?”

I have read many stories about curses before. My mind whirs with thoughts of blood-letting, frog-kissing, and virgin sacrifices. I’ll happily kiss a frog, but sacrifice is not really my preference. And I cannot imagine it is something as simple as a kiss.

“I am unsure,” he replies, although the tiny pause in his voice, the way he looks to the side slightly, makes me think that he knows a little more than he is saying. “But I am fairly sure you are doing something right.”

“Because of... the garden?”

“The entire place. The mirrors, the magic, the light... Life returned to this place, once you came.”

“Slowly, though,” I say quickly.

“I was once told all the best things happen slowly.”

“I still... I still don’t feel like I’m doing anything, though.”

“But you must be,” Thorn says, with some desperation. “*You must be.*”

The fervour of his gaze is alarming, and strikes me senseless for a moment. What does he think that I am doing? Or is it more a desperate hope?

“When you transform, what’s it like?” I ask, attempting to turn his attention to something—anything—else.

“Painful,” he admits, after a pause. “It shouldn’t be. My form doesn’t change. The pain is all in my head. But it is... unpleasant.”

“And... are you inside, the whole time?”

“I’m not sure. The night after, I always seem to remember it, but like one does a dream. Hazy. You might have noticed I’m never myself the day

after.”

“You hurt yourself.”

“Yes, usually trying to get out, if I’m caged. I don’t... I don’t usually bother with that, when it’s just me here. When there’s nothing else living about, I don’t seem to be a danger. The first few full moons you were here, I didn’t lock myself away. I had forgotten what could happen until you told me that you’d heard me.”

I stroke the scars on his arm. “These were for me, then.”

“The lesser of two evils, I assure you.”

Why does he think his pain is any less important than mine? He might be talking about how my death is worse than a few injuries on his behalf, but I am not convinced.

His hand is still bleeding from where I sliced it yesterday. Another injury he has endured for my sake. “Will you argue with me if I insist on doctoring you?”

“I am slowly learning that there is no point in arguing with you.”



# SUMMER

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

*- William Shakespeare*



When I was around six or seven, I got covered in mud, and was forced into a bath I really, really didn't want. The fairies were insistent, and eventually I screamed out, "Stop it! I command you to stop!"

I don't know where the words came from, but I remember with perfect clarity how they immediately snapped back, like magnets repelled away from me.

I laughed, thinking it a game. A game where they would do anything I told them to.

So, I told them to dance. I told them to fill the bath with more mud. I demanded they bring me sweet treats and let me stay up past bedtime. I didn't understand that it wasn't a game, that they were sworn to obey me in the way they were my mother.

And if I did understand that, I relished it. What child wouldn't relish the ability to make others dance at their command, to do whatever they pleased?

But then I woke in the middle of the night from a nightmare, and went to seek out Margaret. I found her sobbing beneath my mother's portrait.

"I'm sorry, Eilin. I don't know what to do. Did I raise him wrong? How can I help him understand?"

I still didn't fully comprehend, but I knew I'd done something to upset her. I shuffled into the room and onto her lap, apologising profusely.

The understanding came later. I swore I'd never order them again, that I would never interfere with their free will. I broke that oath, of course, with a lot of barking at them to leave me alone, particularly during my teenage years, but I never forced them to do obscene things like dance at my behest.

If I could command them now to come back, I would.  
But I do not have that power.



“Let’s reach an agreement,” Rose says at dinner time, after I am clean and rested. “I will not even leave my room the night of the full moon. No matter what I hear. But I want to be the one to lock you in the cell at night.”

I blink at her. “Is this some form of revenge?”

“No. It’s because if I lock you in, I’ll know that you’re safe, too. I’ll be happier then. I won’t convince myself something else is happening.”

I don’t know how to process that.

Rose barrels on. “And... and let me stay with you.”

“What?”

“Not all night. I did promise, after all. But... let me share that with you. You don’t... you don’t need to be alone in that. Not any more.”

My chest tightens. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” says Rose, looking down at her feet.

“What is it?”

She squares up to me, her eyes vivid. “If you ever lie to me again, I’ll kill you. I swear it.”

I swallow, imagining her turning the crossbow she once brandished at the wolves on me. I don’t doubt her words. “If I ever lie to you again, I’ll deserve it.”

“Good,” she says. “If you can’t tell me the truth about something—if you’re not ready—that’s different. But tell me, and I won’t pry.”

Aside from that conversation, I rest for most of the day, recovering and dealing with the raw exposure of my secret and Rose’s impossible



reaction. Of course she forgives me. Of course she understands. I half hate her for it, and half love her all the more.

If she doesn't save me, she will kill me.

I need some time alone to process what has just transpired, although Bramble spends the day beside me, and the silent, hovering forms of the fairies visit me at least twice.

The following day, Rose asks if any of the other guests came close to breaking the curse. My answer is swift, unthinking.

"No."

"How can you be so sure? Did the gardens not—"

"It took a long time for magic to vanish entirely from this place. The gardens were the last thing to start crumbling. They could not be used as an indication."

"Then how could you tell that they didn't come close?"

*Because I never loved any of them. And they certainly did not come close to loving me.* "Quite frankly, most of them did not really care," I tell her, hoping to offer a hint without giving too much away. "They did not engage with the castle—or me—in the way that you have."

"And all of these girls—they all chose to return to their families when the time came?"

This seems an odd question. Of course they did. Why wouldn't they? "Can you blame them?"

"Does the portal never open again in the same place?" asks Rose, not meeting my gaze.

"It can do. It has several places it er, docks, as it were. It has opened in the same place before."

"Is there any way to control it?"

"Possibly," I reply. "Why do you ask?"

"Because... because I was thinking... perhaps... of coming back to see you, a couple of times a year. If... if I may?"

"You... you want to see me again?"

"Of course I want to see you again!" she snaps.

I imagine I looked less shocked when she threatened to kill me. I stare at her for a long while, certain I've misheard.

"Did... did none of them express a desire to do the same?" Rose asks.

"One or two of them promised to, but then a year passed, or two, and they forgot. Moved onwards, as they should." *Felicity. Grace.* Although

for the latter, I'm not sure if she forgot or if she died before she could. I don't know how much time lapsed outside.

"I cannot believe that not one looked back."

"Can you not?"

Rose squirms in her seat. "Thorn, when..."

"Yes?"

I inch forward, waiting for her to promise something different, wondering if I'll believe her. It would be pointless, of course, as I'm certain to die when she departs from this place, but it would be something to hope for.

"When I go..." she continues, "it won't be easy. I... I don't want it to be forever."

Hope pounds in my chest. "It goes without saying, I don't want it to be forever, either."

She swallows, puckering her lips. "I've grown quite fond of you, you know."

"And I, of you."

As if the word 'fond' could ever aptly explain how much I adore her. I am *fond* of flowers. I am *fond* of animals. Rose is something else entirely, a divine, human anchor, my blade and my bandage.

Rose looks like she wants to say something else, but instead she mutters about a garden task that requires immediate attention and sweeps swiftly out of the room.

I wonder if I am not the only one concealing things.



A few days later, one of the fairies—Ophelia or Ariel, judging from the energy by which she buzzes around my head—comes to me just before lunch time.

"What? What is it?"

She darts around the room and hovers by the door, and I sense I am to follow. She leads me up to the roof garden.

The scent of summer floods the air. I am enveloped in colour. Pink, white, red, purple, yellow, orange... roses in every shade, style and shape. More than a season blooms in this place. It's like pure sunlight, pure life.

I race to find Rose. She's in the parlour, reading in the window seat, her skirts spilling over the cushions. She looks so peaceful it's half a shame to disturb her, but I know I'll be forgiven.

"I have something magnificent to show you!" I rush, my voice much higher than I'd like. "Come on!"

I bound out of the room, slipping and sliding, before scooting back in to check if she's following. "Come on!"

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise."

"You cannot top the library, Thorn."

"This might come close."

She shrugs, putting on a smile as she follows me up the stairs. I emerge a few seconds before her, turning to capture the sheer look of amazement on her face as she steps into the light. A face of pure joy and wonder, so rapt that she can barely speak.

I would look at her that way, if I had a human face.

*Maybe one day*, says a voice I hardly dare to believe.

"Roses have always been my favourite," I say, my words as soft as a touch, "even before I met you."

Rose stands beside a pink rosebush, stooping to sniff the bloom, admiring the satin sheen of the petals. I draw towards her, unconsciously but so abruptly that she bolts upright, snagging her finger on a thorn.

"Ouch!"

I grab her hand, tugging her towards the fountain. "Over here."

The wound, being so small, vanishes almost as soon as it touches the water. Rose pulls out her finger, staring at it. "Healing waters?"

I grin. "Healing waters. Blessed by the fairy queen herself."

"How convenient."

"Well, it won't heal any serious wound, but nicks and scrapes it can manage." I massage her finger. "You should be more careful when admiring roses. I hear they can be dangerous." I try not to smile too smugly at my own choice of words.

Rose smiles, almost as smugly, glancing at my pendant. "Personally, I've always rather enjoyed them for their thorns."

I laugh, fighting against the warmth in my chest. “You are an odd creature.”

“As are you.” She taps my chest, sending liquid fire shooting through me. “Luckily, we're rather of the same oddness, so I rather think we suit.”

How much I love and hate her for comments like that. *Yes, yes we are the same. And different. Too different, still.*

I turn away from her. “I got your rosebud up here, for your necklace,” I say, filling the silence.

“That was months ago!”

“They certainly took their time. I wasn’t sure they would bloom at all. They were the last thing that dried up, you know. The last to come back. It is my favourite place in the entire castle.” I look at her, and she’s smiling at herself. “Let me show you why.”

There is a ladder at the edge of the garden which leads to a small platform, almost like a gazebo. I let her go first. It’s the highest point in the castle. You can see for miles—the ever-changing mountains, the blue skies, the streams and lakes and trees and meadows.

But I am uninterested in the view. It is her reaction I crave. Her expression in the light is one of the few of hers I have come to understand. It is perhaps my favourite; wonder. Pure, unadulterated wonder, as if this sight is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. There is a soft sheen in her eyes, but no sadness. Her eyes look beyond, not inward. She is not thinking of home, or anything, really. Her face is as still as a canvas.

If I had a face—a real, human face—it would mirror hers in this moment. But I am not looking at the view. I am looking at her.

Her skin shines like moonlight, her eyes glittering like pools of water. I want nothing more in the world than to place my hand against her cheek, and press my lips to hers. For a moment, I imagine it. The minute our flesh meets, my fur vanishes. I am stripped of my trappings, undone, unravelled, reborn, revealed. My ugliness will melt away under her beauty. I am sure, for one, brief, beautiful second, that the minute my skin touches her, we will spark into life like chips of flint. Our hearts would explode in our chests.

But would hers?

Of course, I will never touch her, not like that. I am afraid of the look on her face afterwards, the look of revulsion, disgust... fear. I like the way she looks at me now. I would not risk it for anything.

Not even my life.

"I think we can say, quite certainly, that the magic has returned to this place," I say, appearing beside her. I swallow a sigh. There is probably enough magic to send her back, to open the gateway myself. I decide against telling her this, because of what it will cost. I am almost certain that she would never let me do it, if she knew about the sacrifice, but there is always the chance, the niggling doubt, that she won't care.

I need a little more time with her. A little more. *Please.*

"When the solstice comes, the gateway should be clear," I tell her. "You will have several hours with which to make your escape."

"What do you mean?"

"When you came here before, the way closed almost immediately. There was not enough magic to keep it open any longer. This time, I think it will be open for a while."

"Oh, good."

The hope beating against my chest hurts, and I look at her, begging for more.

"I don't want to have to rush."

My heart thumping, I slide a hand slowly across her cheek. It stays there, half in her hair, half on her skin. Our gazes thread together, her eyes greener than spring. I want to paint her. I want to capture her image and fold it between the pages of a book. Words cannot do her justice.

My throat feels dry. If I cannot speak, I need to show her.

"Stay here," I request, my voice husky. I leap off the platform and disappear into the rose bushes. "No peeking!"

I start to pluck the flowers, a pair of secateurs appearing before me. Rose stays up on the platform, gazing out, her fingers brushing her necklace. I don't think I've ever seen her take it off.

"How did you make this, when you say your hands are so clumsy?" she calls down.

"I had help," I reply, as the fairies buzz around me. One of them hands me a ribbon to wind the flowers into a bouquet. "From our little fairy friends." I climb back up to the top, the three of them coming with me. They dart around Rose's face.

"Oh, hello!" she squeals. "How nice to see you again!"

I grin, extending my free hand out to touch them. "It's been a while, old friends."

“How did they help you if you couldn’t see them?”

“Just because we cannot see someone,” I say, “doesn’t mean they aren’t there. They’ve been here my whole life, keeping me fed and the castle as upright as possible... fixing chains and tying ribbons.” I present her with the bouquet, her eyes lighting up in such a way that desperate hope flames inside me.

“Thank you,” she breathes, clutching them to her chest. She admires them for a long moment. “You truly have a talent when it comes to arranging flowers! You’re extremely good with colour.” Something flickers in her face. “Wait here.”

She disappears back down the stairs. The fairies hover in the space she occupied, and one turns to me as if to ask, “What?”

I shrug my shoulders. I have no idea. I try to focus on the view, but it isn’t the same without her. Nothing is.

Eventually, I hear the sound of her banging up the steps, dragging something behind her. She appears with an easel, paints, and a blank canvas.

I frown as I help her set everything up. I don’t recall her mentioning being a painter. “What are you doing?”

“Painting!”

“You want to paint?”

“Actually, I’m a terrible painter, but I can sketch well enough. You’re doing the painting.”

“Me?” I take a step back. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea—”

“Well, how will you know until you try?”

There is nothing I can say to that. I concede silently, loading different paints into the tray while Rose sketches the outline of the garden. Carefully, gently, I pick up a brush and begin to mix the colours. Perfect shades begin to emerge.

Rose pushes me into the seat when her outline is done. It is a small, spindly stool, conjured here by the fairies, and groans under my weight. It makes me feel even more ridiculous than I already do, holding up a trembling brush I’m sure to break.

The tip divides against the canvas, leaving a splurge of red on the page. My first stroke and it’s already ruined. I look up at Rose, desperate for her to see that this is a terrible idea.

“Try it without the brush,” she suggests instead.

Is she mad? “Without the brush?”

Rose loads her little finger with a small measure of red, leans over my shoulder, and presses it against the white. Her breath brushes against me, but I try to focus on her instructions. She steps back, and I follow her example, coating my nails in various shades and dragging them along the canvas.

The roses begin to bloom. I layer the canvas with colour, oranges and reds. I smear blue over the skies, rubbing clouds into life. Rose picks up a tiny brush and assists with some small, fiddly bits—tiny lines, little more. Before long, not a spot of white remains.

Rose steps back to admire it.

“It’s messy,” I say. It’s nothing like the still lifes that decorate the halls of the castle.

Rose shakes her head. “Oh no, it’s wonderful! It doesn’t have to be perfect to be beautiful.”

“Do you really like it?”

Rose nods, as if speechless with the same kind of wonder that gripped her on the platform. But there’s no way I could create that wonder within her, not with something I made.

“Do you want it?” I ask.

“More than anything.”

We are both so close that I can make out every tiny freckle across her cheeks. She leans forward to rub away a spot of paint on my nose, but her hand stays on my face. For a long moment, neither of us says anything.

She is so impossibly, utterly beautiful, especially in moments like these, with a smile that seems to strip away her layers right down to her naked mind. I see her soul bared behind those eyes, behind the glances she bestows on me. Her heart smiles at mine.

I want to drink her in.

In moments like these, when I see her so keenly, I am fooled into thinking she feels exactly the same. I feel, for a minute, it is printed as clearly as text, as solid as stone. A fundamental truth.

My throat aches. All of me aches with wanting her. “I wish I were a human man, and had human lips, so that I might kiss you.”

Rose blinks at me, and I wait for the inevitable revulsion, the horror. The snort of derision.

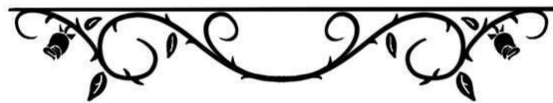
Instead, she merely smiles. “Who says I’d let you?” she says, and punches my arm. Still grinning, she drops away from me, and runs for the steps.



# 21



## ROSE



My first response—the one that runs to the tip of my tongue before I can think it—is, *if you were a human man, I'd let you.*

I catch it just in time. I do not want those words spoken. I fear they would do more harm than good. I do not want Thorn to hear those words, “if you were a human man” not from me, not from anyone. Thorn is a human man. Or as good as one. Or better. *So much better.*

Back in my room, I take down the portrait of an unknown woman and hang Thorn's painting. It truly is wonderful, I said nothing merely to bolster his confidence. I absolutely adore it. I hope I can convince him to do more.

His bouquet sits on my dresser, his ribbon folded in my drawer, next to the snowdrops he presented me with, so long ago. I pressed them rather than watch them wilt. I wonder what he would think, if he knew I did that? I'm not sure I want him to know, and I'm not sure why.

I touch my lips, absent-mindedly at first. They feel softer than before, larger, more noticeable. I touched them like this after I kissed James

Saintclair, too. They feel different now, moved by the mere thought of a kiss, the possibility of fireworks.

But that is not what would happen if I kissed Thorn. I drop my hand away. It does me no good to dwell on something like that, something that cannot be. My lips still sting, but now they feel as if I've picked at a wound that was starting to scab over.



It is the day before the funeral and I cannot sleep. There is not the slightest bit of weariness in me; each little corner of the room is awake. Moonlight spills in through the gaps in the curtains and I can see every line and edge of the room. The quietness is palpable. There is the slightest ruffling of bedsheets from my two sisters, the occasional, whispered sigh. An echo of noise. Nothing is still.

I want to climb into Mama's bed. I want to snuggle into her warm arms and press my forehead to her chest. But Mama's arms aren't warm any more. She is not in her bed.

She lies downstairs in a box, her face painted, dressed like a doll, her skin as white as porcelain. Mr Arnold, the village toymaker, has a beautiful doll, whose eyes open and close when she is picked up.

Nothing will open Mama's eyes now, and I am scared of the person in the box. I am scared because she looks like Mama, but isn't. Mama is a laugh, a smile, a pair of gentle hands and warm arms. Mama is bright and lovely.

So Mama is gone, leaving only a shell behind. I wish I knew where she had gone. I wish I knew when she'd be back. I know—or they tell me—that she “has gone to a better place” but what was wrong with this one? What was wrong with us?

I know Mama won't come back. I know that she is dead. I just wish I knew why. I push back the coverlet and swing my legs out of the bed, pressing my soles into my slippers. I creep across the floor, ignoring every creak, carefully slipping through the door and down the stairs.

Mama's shell is laid out in the dining room, in a box lined with red velvet. She is dressed in white, flowers twined in her hair.

This will be the last time I see her face.

I hear a noise from the corner of the room. It is Papa, sitting in his chair. He has an empty glass in his hand, and his face is red. He looks more like my grandpa than my father.

He puts down his glass and goes into the dining room. I am afraid, as if I have been caught doing something that I shouldn't, so I stay still, waiting on the steps, my little head pressed in between the bannisters.

Papa puts out his hands and places them on my Mama's cheeks. He pulls at her ringlets. His face crumples into something angry, and he tears out the blossoms in her hair and claws at her gaudy wrappings. Then he starts to choke. A guttural sound rises from his throat. Tears peel from his eyes.

He levers her into his arms. Her body is stiff, but he does not seem to notice. His fingers turn into twisted talons. He digs into her skin. His face disappears into her hair and sobbing fills the room. It echoes around each crevice of the house, like a ghost.

I am no longer scared of the person in the box. I am more scared of the man outside it.



Days pass, my nightmares muted under the softness of the sun and the warmth that occupies the space between Thorn and myself. I spend the daylight hours in the garden, with him nearby almost all of the time. One morning, I look up from my gardening to find he's vanished. I don't think anything of it, deciding to take a break myself and stretching out in the shade of a nearby tree. I hum the lullaby under my breath, the one I heard in the forbidden room. The lyrics still escape me. Something about home amongst the fairies in the realm of dreams and love...

"That's a lovely tune."

I startle. Thorn is in the branches high above me. He drops down in a single bound. "Sorry," he says. "I was up there when you came and I

wasn't sure whether to stay, or say something, and now I feel... mildly awkward."

"It's fine," I assure him, laughing. "I'm trying to figure out the words, I can't quite pin them down."

Thorn throws back his head. *"Home is here in the realm of dreams, home is here in your arms. The realm of the fairies is your home my dear, here I'll shelter you from harm."*

"You know it!" Delight bubbles inside me. "I thought it was a family thing. Mama used to sing it to us, but no one else in the village knew it."

"I think your mother was part fey," he says simply.

"Be serious."

"I am. When this place fell, many fairies escaped into the world. I imagine they disguised themselves as humans, and lived ordinary lives, only telling our tales to their offspring."

It makes a certain degree of sense, I admit. It explains a lot of Mama's songs and stories. I wonder if she ever knew that they were more than just that?

*There you are, Rose! I was afraid the fairies had come and snatched you away...*

Thorn touches my arm. "Rose?"

"Sorry," I laugh, throwing the memory away.

"You might be right, you know. Do you remember the rest of the song?"

He sings the next line. *"Here you are safe and here you are loved, and here I will stay for all time. I'll always be here, my darling, my dear, in the stars, the sea and the shine."*

I sit a little in awe for a moment, surrounded by happy, bubbly memories. "You have a nice voice," I say.

"Thank you."

A soft breeze sways through the tree. I look up into the branches, examining the spot where Thorn sat.

"I have never been able to climb trees well," I admit. "Freedom pushed me out of a tree once, and even though he apologised and offered to teach me later, I didn't trust him enough to get up in the branches again."

Thorn is quiet for a moment. "Do you want me to teach you?"

"Yes."

"I... I'm not sure I can. I mean... I am so much... larger than you, and..."

"Stronger?"

“Yes.”

I am not annoyed. He is stronger than I am, but I’m not sure how much of a difference it will make to my ability to climb.

“Will you try?”

“Of course, if that is what you wish.”

I hitch up my skirts and tie them under my apron, trying to ignore the sudden shock of skin I’ve exposed. Thorn’s eyes immediately leap to it, and then whirl upwards in an attempt to look somewhere—anywhere—else.

The first branch is far above my reach, so Thorn has to lift me up into that one. He follows me with ease.

“Put your hand on that one,” Thorn instructs. “And your foot there. If you grab that branch with your other hand... can you pull yourself up?”

The first three instructions are easy, but the fourth is considerably harder. My immediate thought is that I am never going to manage this, that I have none of the muscle strength required to haul myself upwards. But then Thorn is beside me, whispering in my ear.

“You can manage. Keep going.”

I feel his presence keenly, more real and definite than anything else. He hovers, inches away, ready to catch me, or support me. I have never felt safer. I am afraid of nothing, with him behind me. It takes a bit of time and several failed attempts, but I finally pull myself, ungracefully, onto the next branch.

Only about six more to go.

Thorn hovers behind me the entire time, inches away, ready to catch me if I falter or fall. But his words have already strengthened my resolve. After a few failed attempts, I finally pull myself onto the next branch.

I look back at him, grinning, waiting for him to follow.

We climb to the top together, and I can’t help but gasp, even though I know the view from the top of the castle is better. This feels more... *more*, as if the beauty of the lush trees and sharp mountains is heightened by the effort.

“It’s magnificent,” I proclaim. “I feel like I’m the queen of the kingdom. How do you not want to stay up here forever?”

Thorn pauses. “It gets uncomfortable after a while,” he tells me, although I sense he was about to say something else. “Plus, I didn’t bring a book.”

I laugh. "Perhaps we could make our own tale. Once upon a time there was a young girl called... Lily, who led a very boring and mundane life. One day she met a boy called, um, Reed, and after that point even the boring things were better. The end."

Thorn's cheeks twitch. I can tell that he's biting back a smile. "The story lacks conflict."

"It's internal," I say, shrugging. The action causes me to half-lose my balance, grabbing hold of a branch. I no longer feel content to stay up here forever, and Thorn seems to sense it too. The lesson is over.

Thorn leaps out of the tree and then looks up to see if I am following. Impulsively, seeing he is waiting, I let go and launch myself into his arms. He obviously isn't expecting this. He catches me perfectly, but is caught off balance, and we both go tumbling into the grass. I giggle as I roll on top of him.

"Sorry," I say.

I am thankful when he doesn't ask if I am all right. I am not a piece of pottery. Instead, he reaches up and pulls a bit of grass from my hair.

"A little warning, next time? My catching skills are usually much more impressive."

"I remember."

How much has changed since the first time he caught me? It is difficult to imagine me, us, back then. The time when we were strangers belongs to someone else.

It takes me a while to shuffle off him. I think I could spend the rest of the afternoon lying there quite comfortably, but a sudden idea strikes me.

"Come on!" I say, leaping up.

"Where are we going?"

I run back to the castle, dragging him behind me, and pull him into the music room. A dozen sheets are thrown in his direction. "These are all the ones I know that I could find," I say. "Pick one."

I sit down at the piano while Thorn thumbs about awkwardly for one. Finally, he drops a song in front of me. A pleasant, rowdy tune that I must have sung a hundred times before. There was always singing in my house. Mama would sing her old ballads and folk songs, Nanny her country tunes as she kneaded the bread. I would sing whilst I was gardening, and Honour and Beau just sang perpetually. Even Freedom could frequently be heard

humming an old favourite, or whistling whilst he polished his weapons or chopped wood in the garden.

After a few notes, a few lines, Thorn's voice starts to slip on top of mine. We merge together. He cannot know how much this means to me, to be singing with someone again. For a moment, it feels like home. Honour and I are doing a duet. I would always take to the piano—less easy to be noticed—and back up Honour's beautiful voice. I loved singing with my sister.

Then, there is a strange moment, when I look up at Thorn, and I prefer this. I like singing with him more than with her. Is that right? Or am I just forgetting what it was like to be by her side? Perhaps Thorn and I are just better at harmonising. Perhaps it just sounds more lovely.

*He does have a lovely voice...*

The song draws to a close.

"Was that all right?" Thorn asks. "You look... peculiar."

"I just... I enjoyed that."

"We can do another."

We do. Afterwards, Thorn admits that he has never done this before, accompanying a woman on a piano, not one he didn't count as family. I think perhaps he is as moved as I am. When I go to bed that night, my room feels different, and so do I. I can feel a shift inside, but I do not know what it is, and the words do not exist to explain it.



*I have to break the curse.* The thought keeps me up for several nights, twittering at the back of my mind, squirming into the snatches of slumber I'm able to steal. I have to find some way to free this castle from its cage, to free Thorn. The trouble is, I don't know where to begin. The library has been thoroughly unhelpful, and it's not like I have any other way of—

But I do have another way. I have the mirrors. Thorn told me that they couldn't show him anything of mine I wouldn't wish him to see, so I imagine there are limits to its power, but it is a much better starting place.

I waste no time, disturbing Bramble as I leap from the bed, hastily pulling on my dressing-gown as I hurtle towards the chamber.

The silence of the castle seems voluminous as I step into the room, like a colossal monster to be vanquished. The candles flicker into life, stirring the shadows. A chill whispers through me.

I almost want to turn back, but I steel myself, refusing to buckle. I'm not entirely sure where to begin, but the Mirror of Memories is a good place to start. "Show me... the curse being cast."

The mirror ripples, like liquid silver. I see a figure cloaked in black moving towards the forbidden room. A fairy guard is stationed in front, but is immediately cut down. The figure slips inside, but then the image whirls again and disappears. I cry out in frustration; someone, or something, does not want me to know what happened in that room.

"Show me why it was cast."

The ballroom door blows open. Darkness swells, engulfing the lights. The same dark figure swarms upon the floor. Her face sends shivers running through me. The face from the lake. She marches towards the throne, where she screams at the golden person seated there. Her voice crawls under my skin.

"How dare you close the way to the mortal realm!"

"It had to be done," the golden figure of the fairy queen replies. "Our people were growing foolish, causing the humans harm—"

"You would choose them over us?" The dark fairy laughs. "Of course you would. You love them. But they are not like us, they are weak and mortal—" Her eyes dance to the portrait behind the throne, fully whole in this memory. The Queen stands beside a beautiful man, but he looks ordinary compared to her. Ordinary but... slightly familiar.

The queen rises, a pale, silent anger twitching in the corner of an otherwise flawless face. A wave of her wand sends the intruder flying. When she rights herself, she shoots the queen a look that could melt stone, and vanishes.

The mirror goes dark. "Show more," I demand, "show me what happened next—"

My own reflection argues back. I shout again, but nothing happens. Why won't the castle let me see? Doesn't it want the curse broken?

A cold chill runs through me. My eyes drift over to the covered mirror. Perhaps the castle does want the curse broken. Perhaps something else



prevents me.

What am I to do? I cannot heal the wound I cannot see. A dozen Roses stand dumbstruck and helpless, and all but one of the images move to wipe their damp eyes with the back of their sleeves. The one image that does not move resides in the Mirror of Truth. She stands still, defiant, unblinking and unmoving. Is that really who I am?

I swallow, and this other Rose stares back bravely. “Can I even break this curse?” I ask her.

The reflection nods.

“Am I doing something to help break it right now?”

Nothing.

“May I have a clue?”

She is as still and silent as ever.

“This is infuriating!” I turn back to the Mirror of Memories. “Show me the others!” I demand. “The others that came here before me—show them to me!”

What am I doing that they didn’t?

A young girl swirls into view. She is small and slight, pretty and skittish as a kitten. I see Thorn watching her arrive at the castle, smaller and younger than he is now, and bubbling with excitement. He races out to meet her and—

Her face explodes into screams. Screams that carry on, reverberating around the room, shaking the castle to its core. The screaming seems to last for weeks, until her voice fades and she becomes a shadow in the corridors. Thorn too, learns to shrink away, damaged far more than she is by their meeting.

Was that the first time he thought he was a monster? When he saw himself through someone else’s eyes?

The second girl has dewy skin, honey-coloured hair and a smile that could make most people melt. She wears it when she stands in the gardens, when she plays at the harp... but that smile vanishes whenever she catches sight of Thorn. Snippets of their time together unfold before my eyes. At one point, she laughs, “*Who could ever love a monster like you?*”

A rage boils inside of me. I want to reach right through the glass and strangle her, wipe this memory from existence. How dare she. But she is not the only one.

“*Get away from me!*”

*“Hideous creature.”*

*“Out of my way—”*

*“Disgusting—”*

*“Monster!”*

There are some, some who do not shout or scream or rage. They offer kind words, nods of sympathy, whispers of understanding... but there is such coldness, reservation, distance. Where are the nights of fireflies by the lake, cosy evenings in the library?

I can barely watch. Is this why I am different from them? Is this how I am breaking the curse? By treating Thorn as he deserves to be treated? Or... or is it by accepting this place as my home? By being happy here?

I do not know. I look back at the mirror, hoping for more enlightenment on the subject, but instead, I see my mother. She is almost the spit of Honour, with her golden hair, shining complexion, bright smile. Only my eyes are more like hers than I remember, dark green and glorious. I have a touch of her curls, too. She is as young and fresh as a rosebud... this is Mama before she was a mother.

Have I made a mistake? Did I accidentally ask the mirror to show me her, instead? Or has it somehow read my mind, felt my need for something warm and pleasing?

She is sitting in a rose garden, tending to the bushes, humming under her breath. She drops a few stems into a basket by her side, and then looks about for her secateurs. A hand I know only too well dangles them above her head. She looks up, laughing.

*“Oh, dear Beast, you do like to tease!”*

Thorn smiles and hands them back to her. It is then that I realise where Mama is: she is in the garden. Our garden. Mama was *here*.

“Rose?” A sleepy voice sounds from behind me. “What are you doing up at this hour? Who are you...” His eyes sail over me to the baffling image within the frame. He breathes longingly. “Grace!”

A sharp silence stretches between us. I know what I’ve seen, I hear what he has said, and yet it takes me an age to understand. “You knew her,” I say finally.

“Of course I knew her. She was one of the few I could have called a friend. Why are you—”

“Because she’s my mother!” I rush. “You didn’t know?”

Thorn's eyes widen. "She's your... your mother? No, no I didn't know —"

"How is this even possible? She died eight years ago and you're... you're not secretly really old, are you?"

"What? No, no. She was here only three years ago. I knew time ran differently, but it just never occurred to me..." He can barely take his eyes from the mirror, but he does, briefly, as if to check my face against hers. "I should have known," he whispers.

"We don't look alike."

"No, it's not that. It's more to do with how you look at me."

Of all the strange, bizarre and inexplicable things I have experienced in the past few months, this feels to me the most impossible. But then a million tiny details click into place. Mama's fairy stories. Her mystical wedding dress. The way she would stare fondly at the land behind the stream, but forbid us from crossing. She was not part fey, like Thorn had theorised earlier. She knew all about the fairy realm because she had visited it before. Because she knew him.

I think about what Thorn has just said. We were different from the others because of how we look at him. How many times had she told us not to judge by appearances? Was she thinking of him, every time?

"What was she like?" I ask him. "No one alive has fresher memories of her than you do."

"She was... kind," he says, as if this is the nicest word in the world. "A thoroughly beautiful soul. She was patient and sweet. It's a shame you don't take after her."

I elbow him in the side.

"She screamed, when she first saw me," he continues. "But it was a flustered sort of scream, as if she were trying to control it, knew that it was impolite to say anything. Then she ran into the next room, shutting the door behind her and blabbering, 'I'm so terribly sorry... terribly sorry. Just... just give me a minute, please! I really must apologise...' Her tone and her words were so unusual that I began to laugh. Then she slowly crept out of the room, giggling nervously. By the end of the week she was calling me her dear friend."

I cannot help but smile. "That sounds like Mama."

Thorn and I share a look, not one we've had before. I don't know entirely what it means, but it is born out of this shared person we both

knew, and loved. I feel he knows me even more through her, and vice versa. I am so glad she knew him.

“What do you remember of your mother?” I ask him.

He blinks at me.

“You knew my mother,” I explain. “I should like to know a little more about yours.”

“I remember very little. She was kind. Selfless. A fierce protector. I remember... I remember how she made me feel, even though I cannot remember her touch. I remember... I *know*... that she loved me.”

I swallow painfully. “There’s nothing greater than that, is there?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“And nothing worse.”

Thorn senses I have slipped into a painful reverie. “Come,” he says, taking my hand. “I have something else to show you.”

He takes me to a small gallery room in one of the towers. Faint dawn light is already spilling into it. I may have been in it before, but clearly paid it no heed, because now I see what Thorn has brought me up to see: a portrait of Mama.

“This appeared the day she left,” he explains. “The last truly magical thing to happen, before your arrival. The castle started to decline not long after.”

There are five other portraits in the room, each equally spaced. “The others,” Thorn explains. “The visitors before you.”

I take a moment to examine them now, side by side. A name is printed beneath each one. That is all they are now, a name in this castle’s history.

There is a blank frame in the room. A seventh. Mine. Thorn sighs when he sees me looking at it.

“It arrived a few days ago,” he said.

The wooden backing glares at me. It is getting ready.

When I finally sleep, I dream I am back at home, watching Mama’s spirit dancing around her home. She kisses all of us goodnight, and then settles into the chair opposite Papa. He always kept that seat free, for her, and it is like she has never left.

Then the dream shifts. I am still at home, but bars are placed around my window. I am screaming, and my scream flies through the wind, all the way to a ruined castle, where my portrait hangs in a dusty chamber.

I will not become a portrait. I am not a part of this castle's history. I am not paint, or dust. I will not abandon Thorn. I will not.



When the next full moon comes, Rose walks down to the crypt with me, her arm tucked into mine. Bramble comes too, warily, as if sensing that something is amiss, that I am less myself than usual.

The journey is wordless. I wonder if she's afraid. I am. I do not want her to see me as a monster, but then she already has, and still adamantly refuses to accept it. That scares me too, but for a different reason.

As I slip into the cell and close the door, I tell her she does not have to stay.

"I want to," she responds, her words firm. "At least until you're not... you anymore."

"It won't be pleasant to watch."

"I can't imagine it's pleasant to go through."

*It isn't.* "I'll need to change."

"No peeking, I promise."

She turns around to give me some privacy, and I strip everything away. Margaret hates it when I waste clothes. I slide them through the bars as I always do, but this time, there is someone to take them from me. She folds them up, her actions careful. I am not sure what this gesture means, or if she only does it to give herself something to do, but I am grateful for it.

"Who used to let you out?" she asks, back still turned.

"Myself. Apparently, I don't know how to use keys when I'm in that state."

I estimate we have around ten minutes until sunset. I am not sure how to pass the time, but I come and sit on the other side of the door, pressing my back to the bars. I am not sure if I imagine it, but I think her body relaxes against mine. She is so free with me, so unapologetically easy. I have never been so comfortable with anyone else, and never so afraid.

“You can still—”

“I’m staying.” She wriggles her hand through the bars and finds my arm. She squeezes it. The pressure ignites a fire in me. Nobody else’s touch ever did this, either. “You won’t be alone tonight. Unless... unless you really want me to go?”

I do not want her to go. I never want her to go. I want her to be by my side, always her, always unafraid. “No,” I tell her, trying to press the weight of my desire into my voice. “I don’t want you to go.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes more. She strokes my arm. It is a tender, gentle thing. Not like how she strokes Bramble. There is a lot wound up in this motion, or so I hope.

I feel the familiar ripple through my body. I tense under her arm. Bramble starts to growl. Try as I might to contain it, a slight moan escapes. I do not want to show her my pain. I do not want to inflict that on her. “Rose...” I croak, “it’s starting.”

She turns around to face me. I can only see a glimpse of her through my crushed eyes, but she is here, she is with me. I press against the bars, trying to push the pain into the iron, and her face meets mine. She grabs my fists, but I yank them away.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Less concern about me, please, more concern about you.”

Her voice is like water on a burn. For a moment, the pain subsides.

“You are a far more pleasing topic.” I wish I could smile.

“A joke. A joke is good.”

“It wasn’t... a joke...”

“I know.” She grabs my hand again, and this time, I let her. I squeeze back, just a bit. It’s all I can manage, all I trust myself with. My whole body burns, my muscles strain and stretch, as if transforming. My head pounds. I cannot contain it.

I feel a small, cool presence on my cheek. Rose is touching me. “You’re going to be fine,” she whispers.

I want to believe her, but I am too far gone. “I don’t... I don’t feel fine.”

“That’s all right,” she replies, her voice as soft as her touch. “You don’t have to feel fine all the time. I don’t.”

I need a distraction, anything to endure the next few moments, and the beautiful pain of her company. “Tell me... tell me something about yourself that I don’t know.”

This seems to catch her off guard. “Oh, um. My favourite colour is blue —”

“Something serious.”

“I love the colour of your eyes.”

For a second, I am pulled away from the pain. What did she just say?

“Not... a good time... to tease...” I breathe.

“I really wish you’d believe me when I try to compliment you.” She swallows. “That’s another thing you don’t know.”

I shake, vibrating, trembling so hard it is difficult to keep awake, to stay. *Focus on her, I tell myself. She will be your anchor. Hold onto her if you want to hold on to yourself.*

“I used to joke that you were hideous,” she rushes. “I was serious, at the time. But now I see you, now that I see you... I just wish that you could see yourself as I do.”

I almost want to laugh, but I don’t. I believe her. I believe in her beautiful words. “Even... like... this?”

“In all ways, in all lights, in all things.”

I believe what she believes. I almost believe that her words will rescue me from this night. If I can keep looking at her, keep her with me, I will not change.

“Rose,” I cry out.

“I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

Her beautiful, shimmering face is the last thing I see. I take her words, and her affection, with me.





When I wake in the morning, the world is not such an awful place. My limbs are heavy, my head still burns, but shafts of sunlight are drifting into the cell, and Rose is with me. Her presence is warmer, and more real, than the sun. She is sitting by my side, drinking tea, I believe, and she has covered me with a blanket. It could be the fairies, of course, but somehow I know it's come from her.

I open my eyes and my mouth. I try to ask her if she's all right, but she cuts across me.

"How are you?"

Her intention, for once, is quite clear. Her concern is greater than mine. She is trying to tell me that I matter more than she does, at least in this moment. The idea warms me.

"I have been better," I say honestly, rubbing my head. "But I've been worse."

"You didn't howl last night, I don't think."

"No, I didn't... I didn't feel as angry last night as I usually do."

This much is true. I have memories of pacing, of frustration, but no anger. No desire to escape. I do not seem to have hurt myself either.

Rose looks a little pale. "Tea?" she offers. "It's cooled down, now. I didn't drink all of it, promise."

I accept her cup, drinking carefully. This is the first time we've ever shared a drink, the first time my lips have touched anything that hers have. She does not seem to realise the intimacy of this action, but the thought burns through me. She leans against me as I sip away. Does she have any idea what her closeness does to me? My heart swells in my chest. I am going to dissolve into ashes.

"It wasn't... it wasn't too horrible for you?" I ask, desperate to know.

"No," her voice sounds honest, although it is not always easy to tell with Rose. "I think it would have been worse for me, not to see, and to stay up there and wonder."

I nod. It is about all I can manage, for the moment. She cares about me. She worries about me. She wants to be with me. Maybe not to the extent that I do, but maybe, one day, soon...

"Thank you," I tell her. "For being there. It... it helped."

"I'm glad. I... I may stay next time, then?"

For a moment, I fall quiet. Next time falls a few days before the solstice.

"Next time... will be the last time."

“Yes.”

Her expression is impossible to read. I have a month, a month to make her fall in love with me, before she vanishes forever, before my heart breaks. Before I die.

*I am in love with you, I want to say. Irreversibly. I could live the full weight of the years given to me without this curse, and never love another.*

I could meet every soul in the world, but she would still be in only one in the world I clung to. Hers is fire and light and life. Every other is paper in comparison. Flimsy. Burnable. Erasable. Escapable.

Rose pulls me gently into her arms, as if she half knows what I am thinking. There’s a flash of something sad in her expression too, but I hardly dare pluck at it. I wrap my arms around her middle and let her hold me, wishing it was enough, that this affection alone could save me.

For a moment, I let myself forget that she is far more likely to destroy me.



Rose helps me back into the castle and into my own bed, even though I tell her I feel “almost perfectly all right.” She shakes her head and pulls the covers up around me, telling me she feels tired too. I wonder how true that is.

Either way, she doesn’t go to bed. She spends most of the day in the Hall of Mirrors, coming to check on me every so often like an overbearing nursemaid. It is hard to mind, and hard not to miss her when she disappears again.

I love not having to hide from her. What an idiot I was, not to share this with her almost immediately. How easier life is when I don’t have to pretend. How could I ever have thought she’d have hated me?

“Rose?” I ask, as she checks on me just before retiring for the night.

“Yes?”

What did I mean to say? *Sorry? I love you? Stay with me, just a little longer?*

“Thank you.”

She crosses the room again, kissing my forehead. “You don’t need to thank me for caring for you. You’d do the same for me.”

Beautiful, torturous goddess. *But how much do you care?*

She slips away from me, her presence lingering in the air between us.

I fall into a sleep, lighter and easier than usual.



Not long after Penelope left, the magic in the castle started to wane. The fairies tried to hide it from me for a while, but I was sixteen by that point. I knew something was wrong.

“Don’t worry about it, little prince,” Margaret said, patting my hand as if I were a child and didn’t tower over her by this point. “We’ll find a way. We always do.”

Ariel suggested one of them cross over the gateway during the next solstice, to try and find other fairies that might help.

“And if you couldn’t find your way back again?”

“Thorn can open the gateway.”

My ears pricked up. “Wait, I can?”

“No. No. He may be a prince, but he is half-mortal and untrained. The consequences— No. We’ll find another way.”

They cut me out of any further conversation, only including me when a decision had been reached. Margaret would “reduce her form” syphoning her magic into the castle, in a similar way that mother had once done.

“No!” I cried. “No, I forbid it!”

“Calm down, little prince. It won’t be quite like that. I’ll still be here. You can still converse with me. I just won’t have a body for a while.”

“How... how long is a while?”

She stiffened. “Until the curse is broken.”

“And if it isn’t?”

Gazes hit the floor, silence splitting through the room.

“No. No! You’ll... you could... you’ll disappear like Mother. You’ll die.”

“It is the best chance we have of—”

“I don’t care about breaking the curse! I care about you.”

Margaret smiled, reaching out a hand to touch my face. I felt very small again, under her warm fingers. “And I care about you. More than you can understand, right now. We were never going to leave you. We never will. Either way, we’ll die eventually. This way offers hope.”

“And we’ll still be here,” Ophelia added, flying up to kiss my cheek.

Margaret folded me into her arms. “You have to release me,” she said. “You have to let me go.”

I hugged her back fiercely. “I don’t want to.”

“Love means letting go,” she said. “Please, my beautiful boy.”

I swallowed, the ache deep in my chest. “Do what needs to be done,” I whispered.

“I always have.”



It was strange having Margaret there and not there. Talking but not eating, fussing but not hugging. I missed her hugs. She was the best at them, so strong I rarely worried that I would break her.

Magic fizzled back, for a while. A few more years passed before it waned again.

Then it was Ophelia’s turn.

I was older then. I didn’t cry as much. As least, not in front of them. I told myself I couldn’t miss her if she was still there.

I did, though. It was like she had gone somewhere and left her voice behind.

Ariel was still there through it all, thick and thin, through every visitor, every harsh word, every transformation.

Until Grace left, and the gardens started to die. When the next solstice came, the gateway could barely open.

“I think, maybe—”

“No,” I said, cutting her off, “don’t even think about—”

“You can’t order me not to think,” she snapped. “But all right.”

A few months later, it was dust and ash, and Margaret and Ophelia's voices were growing fainter and quieter.

The next solstice, the way didn't open at all.

The morning after, I couldn't find Ariel anywhere. I panicked, thinking she'd gone already, remembering that I'd never expressly forbidden her from leaving. I fled around the castle in a frenzy, before spotting her in the meadow beside the fog.

I rushed to her side. "I thought... I thought you'd..."

"What?" she said, flashing a smile, "Without saying goodbye?"

My stomach plummeted, because I knew what she had to do, and that I had no choice.

"I don't want you to go."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere."

"It won't be the same."

"No." She sighed. "No, I know it won't be."

"It's not fair. It's not fair that you have to do this." *It's not fair that I have to be alone.*

Ariel squeezed my shoulder. "Did I ever tell you that I once spent twelve years imprisoned in a tree?"

"Not sure I see the relevance?"

"Well, it was a beastly place to be trapped. And then the ass that freed me made me work for him for years. Not a fun time in my life."

"I don't understand?"

"There are worse places to be trapped than here," she explained. "And worse people to serve."

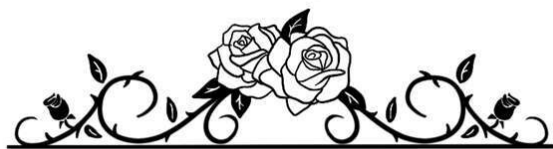
"You are not my servant."

"No, I'm not. So I'm not doing this out of loyalty. So don't waste time feeling bad, all right?"

"I... I wish there was another way."

Ariel pulled me into her arms, holding me against her shoulder. I wondered how long it would be before another person held me like this, or if anyone ever would. "This isn't forever," she said. "Not forever at all."

But it wasn't enough. I had a few months more with her, a few more months of chatting beside the fire, and then she too grew quiet, and their forms grew dimmer, until finally, finally I was alone once more.



## ROSE



One more month. I have one more month left, before the solstice comes and I return to the mortal realm. I continue to read up on the Fey, not knowing what good it will do, hoping to come across some hint of what the curse truly is, and how to break it. Because if I do, and magic returns to the world, there is a chance, however slim, that I will get to see Thorn again. I don't have to say goodbye.

I don't tell Thorn what I am doing. I don't think he would try to stop me—surely he wants the curse broken as much as I do—but I'm reluctant to give him any false hope. I conduct my searches at night instead, after I am certain he is sleeping.

The mirrors offer me little more insight, as I am never sure what question to ask, and am offered snippets at best before someone or something steals back the scenes. I do check in on my family, however. Honour knits in her new parlour every evening, and Charles brings her mulled wine and sits beside her, stroking the back of her hand affectionately. Nanny and Beau are invariably always tucked up in bed when I check in, and Papa has dozed off in his study. Hope is still up, reading at her desk, but sometimes if I catch them during the day, she's tending to my garden.

Freedom doesn't seem to sleep at all. He's either painting in his shed, or stalking the woods. I assume he's hunting, but one night he stops, sticks

his torch in the ground, and sits on a grassy knoll. Slowly, my eyes eke details out of the gloom, and I catch the trickle of running water.

He's sitting beside the stream. If the image alone claws at my heart, his next words nearly shatter it. "Rose," he whispers, "*where did you go?*"

Oh, Freedom. My fingers leap to the glass before I can stop them. I want to fall right through it. "I'm here," I murmur back. As I do, a breath of wind flits through the woods and touches Freedom's hair. "I'll be home soon, soon, I promise."

I have to believe he has heard me, because the alternative is far too painful.

A soft tingle stirs me from my reverie. One of the sprites is hovering beside me. It bobs up and down, darting forwards and then back. I sense it wants me to follow.

It rests in front of the Mirror of Truth. Illuminated behind the glass is a faint, shimmering image, shrouded in a soft, coloured mist. A figure rests within; a girl, my own age, I think, although there is a timeless quality to her flawless skin which is almost golden. She is wearing a ruffled dress of green and white, floating against the glass as if it's filled with water. Her short, gold hair does the same too. I would think her a ghost if not for the keen, live green eyes that stare back at me.

I move closer. She is the person I saw when Thorn pulled me from the lake. The person who undressed me, no doubt. The person who keeps this place moving.

Her face breaks into a smile. "You can see me!" Her voice sounds strange, filtered, echoey. "I was so worried you wouldn't."

"I've seen you before," I say, "the night I fell into the lake."

"I thought you did, but it seemed so unlikely! I guess, you were near-death at the time, and I exist in an in-between place too, so..."

"Who... who are you?"

"I'm Ariel," she says, "I was a... a servant here, long ago."

"Are you a ghost?"

"No," she says quickly, but then pauses. "Yes. I suppose that term fits. I am no longer alive... but then not truly dead, as you see." She waves her arms, and the little dot begins to buzz furiously. "This mirror shows me for what I truly am."

"Are the other little sparks like you?"

She nods.

“Thorn calls you remnants,” I continue. “How did you come to be this way?”

She sighs, and it is the sigh of a hundred years, a long, endless, exhausted sigh. “I had a real form once,” she explains. “And powers too; far beyond that of the simple summoning tricks you’ve witnessed before. But the castle was dying. If we didn’t become one with it, it would have crumbled into nothingness within a few years, and with it any hope we ever had of magic returning to the world once more. We became a part of it, losing our bodies and then our voices, only regaining these fragile containers when... when you came.”

So she, like Thorn, believes that I am doing something to break the curse, but her voice sounds more uncertain than his.

“But... why not just leave?” I ask. “If the castle was going to die anyway—why not go through the gate the next time it opened?” She looks human enough, and with the magic she said she had, she could probably completely disguise herself. It would be easier, surely, than enduring this solitude. “There’s nothing here to keep—” but suddenly, I know why. “Thorn. You were keeping this place alive for him.”

She nods.

“But he said... he said he was one of that... that *face*’s monsters. Why would you—”

“He is more than that,” Ariel says quickly. “Yes, she made him what he is, but... it is hard to explain. He holds the key to restoring our world. To bringing back our people. And...”

“And what?”

“And we love him.”

This news should make me happy, but for some reason it just emphasises his loneliness. He had people, all this time, people who were here but almost as gone as his mother.

“He acts as if you are dead,” I whisper. “I should go and get him—”

“Wait, Rose—” Ariel’s spritely form darts across my path, pulling my gaze back towards the mirror. “I need to tell you something. You’re in danger.”

I already know this. “The face in the lake,” I say quietly. “The dark fairy, or whatever she is.”

Thorn had tried to tell me that the shadows were harmless now, mere reflections of what they were. And perhaps that was true, before I came.



But then I remember, with startling clarity, that awful face, both in the lake and in the mirror, the night Thorn almost killed me. She has been trying to hurt me for some time.

“Thorn wishes to believe she is gone, or weakened by her captivity.” Ariel continues, as if reading my mind. “Because the alternative is far too frightening for him. And he can live in that ignorance, if it pleases him. But I would have you know otherwise. You are not one to run from a fight, I think.”

A cold, dark chill claws through my bones. “Who... who is she?”

“A sorceress of immense power. The dark reflection of all that is light. We all hoped she was gone forever, but it appears she has been lingering here for some time, hoarding her power... She still has a little left, and she is growing desperate. She will come for you. You are far too great a threat.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are the key to breaking the curse.”

“But you said Thorn was—”

“It is both of you,” she says shortly. “Your purpose is now entwined.”

“But I’m not doing anything!”

“Yes,” says Ariel, a little sadly, “you are. But if I tell you what you need to do, we may lose our only shot of ever being free. And I want the curse broken.”

“You can’t give me any clue?” She is little more use than the mirrors.

“If I am honest, none of us are completely sure of the required conditions. I will say this, however: speak your heart.”

“Yes, wonderfully descriptive, thank you.”

“There is so much at stake, Rose, you have no idea.”

“Does Thorn know that he can break the curse?”

“Yes, but, like you, he is a little in the dark. He has been trying for so long—”

Then how am I supposed to manage, in the time I have left? “Is there any chance you could be just a little more descriptive about what it is I am supposed to do—”

“You’re running out of time,” she rushes. “You must... you must tell him, before you go. Be brave. Don’t be afraid.”

A voice calls out in the dark, a scream cuts through me like a hard knife of wind. *Don’t be afraid, Rose. Don’t be frightened.*

“I’m not afraid!” I spit, more venomously than I mean to.  
“Yes, you are,” Ariel says softly, “and it is killing him.”



At some point in the night, an urgent rapping wakes me. Rose's voice sounds on the other side of the door, low but rushed.

"Thorn! *Thorn!* Wake up!"

I stumble out of bed, opening the door. She almost falls into me. "What is it?"

"I was... I was in the Hall of Mirrors and..."

I freeze, thinking of Moya's covered prison, wondering if Rose unveiled it like I once did.

"What did you—"

"In the Mirror of Truth, there was a fairy, she said her name was Ariel —"

The Mirror of Truth. It shows you for what you really are. Why hadn't I thought of trying that before?

*Ariel.*

"Is she still—"

"I'm not sure, but I knew you'd want to see—"

I barge past her, racing to the Hall, turning towards the glass, heart rising in my chest—

But there is no one there. I stand back before it can reveal myself to me, suppressing a sigh.

Rose appears beside me.

"Did... did she say anything to you?" I ask.

“Um, quite a bit. Pretty much everything you told me. I’m key to breaking the curse, dark fairy out to get me, etcetera.”

Her eyes avoid me, and I wonder if that’s all they spoke about. Ariel is rarely so cryptic. I doubt she would have revealed everything, knowing what’s happened in the past, but there’s no telling what else she might have said.

*Dammit, Ariel. Come back.*

Rose tugs on my sleeve. “Let’s sit for a bit, in case she returns.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I don’t think I would want to wait by myself,” she says, then shakes her head. “Actually, that’s not entirely true. I probably would want to be by myself, all my hopes and fears locked away, but... but you don’t want to be alone, do you?”

“I... no.”

“And I don’t want you to be alone, so I will stay with you.”

I love and hate that she knows this about me, that she’s capable of realising that I might want something different than her, that she’s offering comfort she might reject for herself. I hate that I cannot offer her the same, that she still hides her pain from me. I hate that I love her more than ever, that I know her more and less.

*You don’t have to thank me for caring about you.*

We sit together on the floor, Rose’s head pressed against my shoulder. “Do you want to watch something?” she asks.

I shake my head. “What do you want, Rose?”

“Right now?”

*Right now. Tomorrow. For the rest of your life. Tell me the deepest crevices of your heart.* “Now is fine.”

“Genuinely?” She looks embarrassed. “I just want you to be happy. I don’t want you to be alone.”

Her words touch my heart, burning somewhere between pleasure and pain. I think about telling her so many things.

“I am happy,” I tell her, “I am with you.”

Rose’s expression saddens. It reads *you won’t always be*. I am glad she doesn’t speak those words. I don’t need the reminder.

She blinks, trying to put on a smile. “I thought we agreed no more lying?”

“That wasn’t a lie.”

“You miss your friends,” she says. “You don’t have to pretend to be happy when you’re missing someone.”

“You do.”

Rose bristles. “That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m always missing someone.”

A sharp burst of pain strikes me in the chest. *Grace*. She still misses her, all the time. Endlessly. And now she has the rest of her family heaped on top of all that grief.

I always assumed that if I knew my own mother was gone for good, that pain would be more manageable somehow, I would no longer be hanging on the precipice of that grief. I could have fallen and climbed back to my feet long ago. But Rose fell into that void eight years past, and although she crawled out of it, she left something behind in the dark.

I don’t think she wants words. She probably already regrets the ones she’s spoken, the tiny chink of the iceberg she’s cast in my direction.

I say nothing, and wrap my arm around her instead.



It becomes so blisteringly hot over the next few days that I debate abandoning clothes altogether, or temporarily moving into the lake during the daylight hours. Rose, noticing that I’ve become so hot I’m panting almost as much as Bramble, asks if I’m all right.

“I’m not very good with the heat,” I admit.

Her eyes widen. “Oh, oh, I didn’t think—”

“It’s all right.”

“It must be sweltering—”

“It certainly isn’t pleasant.”

“You don’t... you don’t have to wear clothes, for my sake, you know,” she says.

My tail twitches with the thought of being naked in her company, never mind that my fur hides almost everything. It would not hide enough. “Oh, but I really do.” *And I’d do a lot more, for your sake.*

Rose looks thoughtful for a moment. "I can trim your fur for you, if you like. I mean, it might not be pretty—"

"Never really something I've been concerned with."

She giggles, and I wish I had some way of bottling the sound.

"The fairies used to trim it for me. I... I don't mind you doing it, instead."

I am unprepared for the intimacy of this idea when Rose finds a pair of shears and instructs me to remove my shirt. "Have you done this before?"

"Sheared a sentient beast? Oddly enough, no."

I laugh. The blades start to snip away. It is a relief to feel something like a breeze against my back, but it might just be Rose's fingers. I feel self-conscious again. I told her I didn't mind if it was pretty, but there's a vain part of me that wants it vaguely symmetrical, even if she's the only person here to laugh at me.

The back, arms and legs are easy enough, but the face is another matter. Sitting, I am level with her chest, and her face is far too close to mine when she snips and shaves at my cheeks. Her nearness is unbearable. She bites her lip in concentration.

I feel like the man in me will burst out of his skin before she can release me. I want to kiss her so badly I ache.

"Are you all right?" she frowns. "You're trembling."

"It's the heat."

"Your tail is twitching."

*Traitorous tail.*

I know I promised no more lies, but I'm not sure I can tell her how utterly she undoes me.

"Are you worried I'll make you look silly?"

"A little," I concur.

She smiles. "You'll be as handsome as ever," she declares, with no trace of irony. "And I'm almost done."

She finishes up and directs me to a mirror. It's a decent job.

"You barely touched my mane."

Rose grins, tugging my ear as she hands me my shirt. "That's because I like your mane. Are you all right to clean up?"



The following day, she hands me a neatly folded parcel, wrapped lightly in paper. I pull the string, already sensing from the weight what must be under it.

Clothes. A lightweight shirt, a pair of linen trousers. She has not found these, she has made them herself, stitched them carefully into the night.

For a moment, I am rendered speechless.

“Rose...”

“Do you like them?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“I hope they fit. I will confess I had to do a little bit of thieving for the pattern—”

“I’ll try them on.”

I disappear behind a screen and tear off my existing trappings. I do not know where she found the fabric, but it is perfectly selected. Light, but not delicate. My claws do not tear it, and she hasn’t included anything fiddly like buttons or hooks. Simple drawstrings.

I emerge from behind the screen, and for a minute, I think Rose is unhappy with the finished project. She stares at me, her mouth partly open, not speaking. Then her face breaks into a smile, and she comes towards me, a slight bounce in her step.

“Better?” she asks.

“Much.”

She places her hands against my chest, pulling the strings a little closer, fiddling with them for a moment. I love this, this closeness, this ease. But it’s difficult too, being so near to her. When her fingers skim against her thorn pendant, and her eyes glisten, I want so terribly to close my whole body around her and lift her into my arms, into me, fully. Bury my face in hers. Close the gaps between us.

“I’m glad they fit,” she says.

“I am, too. I would hate not to be able to wear anything you gave me.”

Rose smirks. "Next time I'll make you something hideous. Bright. Patterned. Ruffly."

"I'd still wear it."

"No, you wouldn't."

"I would. Well, maybe not where anyone else could see me..."

She laughs. "You look... good."

"It's the clothes."

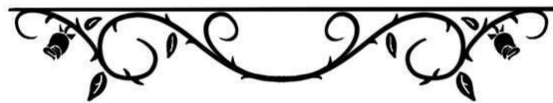
"No," she says quietly, "it's not them." She shakes her head, as if she can erase the words she's just spoken, and I won't obsess about them all night. "Lunch?" she asks brightly instead.

There is nothing to do but nod.





## ROSE



I do not tell Thorn what Ariel and I spoke about, but her final words lodge in my mind, playing over and over again.

My fear is killing him. My fear of what, exactly? Contrary to what I told Ariel—what I tell myself—I have so many. I don't see how any of them could hurt him any more than they would hurt me.

I return to the hall each night after he has gone to bed. I don't see Ariel, although I catch a few more snippets of the castle's history. I see it turning grey and lifeless. I see the fairy queen dismissing her subjects. The gardens lose their lustre, slowly begin to shrivel. The sun darkens. I see the fairy queen weeping over the ruined crib, and then...

Then she is gone, but the gardens begin to bloom again. What happened to her? Where did she go? Is she, like the shadows, still somewhere within the walls?

She was certainly the woman Thorn was talking to, but was he merely addressing her portrait, or something else?

*I don't know what I'd do if I lost you both.*

Who was she to him? If setting her free brings magic back, ensures that Thorn won't be alone when I leave, that we can see each other again... then I will gladly do it, if I know how. But... I will not deny the stab of jealousy I feel, at her being here in my stead, of her being Thorn's confidante, companion... whatever I am, whatever she was.

I want to ask Thorn more about her, but I'm afraid of his answer. I am afraid of who she was, and what we are becoming. I am afraid of what will happen when the magic runs out, if the curse is completed, if whatever lurks in the shadows is released, if *she* is free.

I think about what she said to the Queen, her clear disdain for mortals. I do not want to think about what she will do, but it haunts my thoughts.

Maybe I shouldn't leave. Maybe it's irresponsible of me now, now I know what I know. But what do I know? So many mysteries, so few absolutes. If life returned because of me, will it go when I do?

Perhaps it will take years, like it did the last time. Perhaps I will be able to find a way to break it back home. Perhaps it's not even me. Perhaps I can come back.

*Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.*

Sleep is impossible, so I turn to another mirror and check in on my family one more time. They are mostly all asleep. Hope and Beau are curled up in bed together. She has an open book against her chest. Papa is sleeping in his own bed for a change. Nanny is tucked up in bed, her hair in rags. I figure night time is not the best time to spy on Honour and Charles, so I skip to Freedom. He is still up, burning a candle in the tool shed he uses for painting. Red swirls around the canvas. The image is just as shocking as it is moving.

Me. He is painting *me*.

I press my fingers against the glass. A tear rolls down the painting's cheek. No, it is my own tear, my own reflection. I whisper his name, and an awful question rolls up inside of me.

I turn to the Mirror of the Past. "Show me... show me my family missing me."

I regret the words almost as quickly as they tumble out. I witness Honour sobbing in Charles' arms, the night of her wedding, still in her dress, crying that she should have waited. I see Freedom searching the woods, ten, fifty, a thousand times. I see Beau screaming to go too. I see Nanny coughing out tearless sighs as she cooks, Hope sitting quietly in a snow-covered garden. Papa's is worse. He is crouched by Mama's grave. Snatches of awful conversation spasm about the room.

"Help us... guide her home... I failed you... I'm so sorry, Grace..."

And he wails, wails like he did that night over her coffin.

I go back to my room, horrified by what I have seen, what I have done, and know I cannot wait another six months. Whatever the cost, I have to go home.



I get so badly burned by the sudden burst of intense, summery heat over the next few days, that Thorn has to fetch a bucket of water from the fountain for me to bathe in. Ariel—or one of the other sprites—summons me an ointment made from aloe vera to soothe my raw skin. The following day I am flaky and brown. Thorn tries not to chuckle as I shed skin like a snake.

“You’re enjoying this,” I spit.

“I enjoy nothing that causes you pain,” he returns. “But I do enjoy being the attractive one, for a change.”

Attractive. Thorn thinks I’m *attractive*. I’m not sure he’s ever said anything about my appearance before. I am not naïve; I have seen his eyes linger on me whenever I wear a particularly lovely dress. I have felt his gaze skim my bare flesh. But he has never said anything before, never really alluded to it.

*You always look the same, to me.* How do I look to him? Why should it even matter?

“Attractive, am I?” I poke.

“Well, compared to some,” he teases. Perhaps something in my face changes, because he quickly adds, “You are very attractive, Rose, and well you know it.”

My cheeks redden furiously, because until that moment, I hadn’t really felt I was.

It has become so warm here, so hot, that the weather keeps me up at night. I twist and turn in my sheets, like a fish on land. The heat is suffocating. I have cycled around to that phase that must come once a year for all who live in countries with such defined seasons; I almost long for winter. I cannot remember why I hated the cold so. I can’t even remember what it felt like to be cold. It cannot be as much of a hassle to get warm as

it is to get cool. At least in winter, you can shelter under blankets, surround yourself with firelight, curl up beside your loved ones. Heat is inescapable.

It sounds foolish—and also impossible—but I like the idea of doing winter again with Thorn. Dozing beside the fire, my head in his lap. Our warmth pressed together. Our winter was over quickly, and we were not so close before. Things are different now, so different that I cannot imagine my winters—any seasons—without him. I will have others by my side, but they will not fill his shape. Wherever I go, whatever home I have, there shall always be a space beside my fire that Thorn is supposed to fill. That he *will* fill, for I shall feel his absence as solidly as a physical presence.

The heat also makes it difficult to concentrate. Despite the volumes at my bedside, I get through so little. I try to read whenever I can, try to fool myself into sleep by tiring my brain with words, but nothing sinks in. I will read pages only to realise I have read nothing; the words do not seep in, and the frustration tangles with the heat and makes me even more frustrated. I do not sleep properly, and I snap at Thorn in the mornings, which I think hurts me more than it hurts him, at this point. I am wasting my time with him. I have only two weeks left. I have not discovered anything new about the curse.

I think perhaps this is it. What more can I do? I try to spend more time with Thorn, enjoy the hours we have left, but all the minutes I spend with him are tinged with sadness, regret, annoyance. I could have done more. I should have tried harder. I should have been better to him. I should have cared more when I had the time.

One night, we sit together on the rooftop garden. It is breathtaking, illuminated by soft, shimmering candlelight. We are both trying to read, but neither of us are succeeding. It is too beautiful tonight to do anything but breathe and stare.

“Rose...” His voice is a whisper, and his eyes grow dark and serious. I can tell from the slight waver in his voice that he is nervous, but he does not turn away. Our gazes are fixed. “Are you happy here?”

I respond in an instant. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I expect his expression to lighten, but the most I get is the twitch of a smile. He is still nervous.

“I know it is impossible for you to return the sentiment,” he continues, “but... I’m very glad you came here.”

For a moment, his words hang between us, while I unravel their meaning. Of course he's glad; I'm sure he was glad when the others came, too. A break in his solitude, his loneliness. But this is not what he is saying.

I smile, try to make light of it. "The experience has not been as awful as I first thought it would be." I play with the tassels on my shawl, trying to sound placid. I am not sure it works. I'm not sure I want it to. Despite myself, despite my family... being here with Thorn is, is... "And... I'm very glad to have met you, too. I can't imagine ever not."

All pretence evaporates. I jump from my cushion and throw my arms around him, burying my face in his neck, fingers tight around his clothes. I want him to know, *need* him to know, just how much I mean it. I can't find the words. They don't exist. How to explain that even when torn from my home, my family, even when haunted, and miserable, I am happy. Happy to be with him, in whatever way I can.

Pressed up against Thorn's chest, I realise how broad he is. I feel taut muscles under his shirt. His arms are big and strong, yet they hold me with such firm gentleness. No man I have ever known has touched me in such a way. Then I remember that Thorn is not a man, not exactly, although he is in all the ways that matter.

All the ways that matter, except one.

I inch back and place my head in his lap. A few precious moments tick by in harmonious silence. I am so comfortable, so sleepy, but I do not wish to sleep.

"Thorn?" I whisper.

"Yes, Rose?"

"I do desperately want to see my family again, but... I'm not exactly looking forward to saying goodbye."

Thorn strokes a lock of hair away from my face. Sad eyes gaze down at me. He murmurs something about missing me too. I can't quite make it out; I am virtually asleep. Thorn has to guide me back to my room. I half wish he would just scoop me up again. I do love being in his arms.

I know we have another ten nights together, but there is something about this one that feels like the last. When Thorn closes my door, he stops for a moment, and looks at me like he is afraid that this will be the last time we see one another.

"Rose," his voice sounds almost grave.

“Yes?”

“I know... I know my interaction with other people has been... limited, somewhat. But, I wish you to know that, of all the people I have ever met...”

“Yes?”

“I could meet every soul in the world, and you would still be my favourite.”

For some reason, I cannot find the energy to tell him he is mine, too, and always will be. I kiss his hands instead, and slip back into my room.



I wake at first light, too early for breakfast. Knowing I am unlikely to fall asleep again, I decide to start penning a letter to Thorn, not knowing if I will ever give it to him. I think it is more an exercise in organising my thoughts.

*Dear Thorn, I begin, then quickly scribble it out. No, Dearest Thorn.*

*I did not ask to come here, but now, I cannot imagine my life taking another route. I don't think I want to go. No, I know I want to go home. I do, so badly, but I am not ready to say goodbye to you.*

*I don't think I'll ever be ready.*

*In short, I cannot imagine my life without you. You are the greatest friend—*

I stop. Friend is not right, too small a word. Companion? Too formal. Thorn walks this line between friend and family. He feels so much a part of me. I should have called him Stem or Root instead.

I leave the letter, scrunching it up and stuffing it furiously in my top drawer. I cannot say goodbye to him. I cannot.

I just want to be with him.

*All right, says a voice, one that sounds much like my mother's, twinned, perhaps, with Honour's. They both used to speak like that, as if everything in the world were really quite simple. Then do. Be with him.*

But that is not all I want. I want to be with him and *be with him*. Be with him in a way I can't. And that isn't just what I want, either. I want a way to

be with him that means I can be with my family, too.

*You can't have everything.*

It isn't fair. Most people do not have to choose between their family and their... whatever Thorn is to me. Honour has both. But then, life isn't fair, and sometimes there is a choice that must be made.

I am not sure I can make this one.

I've read enough stories where a girl is placed in a similar predicament. I can't remember anywhere where she chooses her family. The story ends with her riding off into the sunset with the man of her dreams, and we are told it is a happy ending. But does the story truly end there? Why do we not get to see her two, three, five years later, when the ache of her loss has had time to broaden, and her passion lessen?

I do not miss my family as much as I did when I first came here, for certain, but I feel that is because the gap is closing. I know it won't be forever, that it won't even be long. If I could truly never see them again, that hole inside would widen until it engulfed me. What I feel for Thorn could not possibly fill it, could it?

*Could it?*

I would have said I could not have lived without my family, and yet I have. I have learned to live without them. I have even, miraculously, been happy.

*So happy.*

I can survive without them. There are moments, so many moments, where I am filled with wondrous, exalted bliss. I am sunbeams and clouds and cool, translucent waters. I am so many things I never was before. I know the shape and curve of my soul, here.

I can live without them.

I do not think I can live without him.

How did I manage all the years before? How will I manage all the years ahead?



Thorn doesn't come to breakfast. I find him in the ballroom instead. We rarely come in here, but it's a beautiful room, especially with the blooms now cascading through the broken roof, like a colossal greenhouse left to grow wild.

When Thorn sees me, his face breaks into a smile. He races over and grabs my hands.

"Let's have a ball before you leave," he declares.

"A ball?"

"Yes. Fine dining, beautiful music, fabulous clothing, slightly clumsy dancing."

"I am not sure I have the time to create something fabulous to wear..."

"Anything you wear will be made fabulous by proximity."

"Oh, you—"

"So, what do you say?" He twirls me under his arm. Clumsy dancing indeed. Maybe from me.

"Yes," I say hurriedly. "I say yes."

I raid all of the wardrobes I can find in search of something beautiful, ball-worthy, and not completely uncomfortable and over the top. I find one—white—which might do, if I can cut away the ruffles. I would love to add some gold embroidery, but I am very conscious of time. So few days left. A lot of hours to waste on a project like this, when I have so little time left with him.

I put it away, deciding to focus on it when Thorn is in the dungeon during the next full moon. I will need something to pass the hours with. But today I want to spend with him.

It's a beautiful day, so, at lunchtime, we pack ourselves a picnic and head to the lake. It's humming with life, completely separate from that frozen wasteland it was when I arrived. A painter couldn't have made it any more perfect. After we eat, I glare at the still, shining water like one might a nemesis, and start unlacing my dress.

Thorn swallows. "What—what are you doing?"

"Facing a fear," I declare, letting my loose layers drop to the ground until I am standing in nothing but my undergarments. "Would you like to join me?"

Thorn does not refuse. He doesn't deny me anything. He pulls off his shirt and hurtles into the water. I stay closer to the shallows. I am not a strong swimmer, and I have still not forgotten the face in the lake.



“You won’t drown, you know, if you go out of your depth,” he says. “Not while I’m around.”

“I know. I’ve just never been the best of swimmers.”

“I’ll teach you,” Thorn declares.

We both ignore the fact that there is only so much he can do in the time we have left, and I let him pull me in. He holds me in his arms as we go further out. I am not afraid. Nothing bad can happen as long as he is here.

We spend several hours in the water before lying down on the bank to dry. The evening rolls in, but I don’t want to go back yet. Thorn catches a fish, which we fry on a fire we build ourselves, and dine on along with the remaining picnic.

That night, I pen a letter to Honour. I forget to mention anything about being home soon. My letter is filled with news of my swimming lessons, of Thorn and Bramble playing fetch in the shallows, of how it felt to stretch out in the sun beside them and feel like the warmth was coming from me. Time seemed to stop that afternoon.

It is moving exponentially now.



I have to tell her, don't I? I have to tell her outright and just... just hope for the best.

I am not only terrified of dying, now. There have been times I have almost longed for it. But I am not keen to face death. I do not want to leave her side.

Even if she doesn't love me, she clearly cares for me. If I die—and if she discovers she is inadvertently the cause of it—she is going to be upset. I cannot take joy from that. I do not want to see her hurt.

So, I'll wait until almost the last moment. If the gateway is open, she'll be able to leave and not look back. I don't think I'll expire immediately. She doesn't have to know, doesn't have to bear that pain.

My heart trembles, and I feel sick at the thought.

I do not want to die alone.

*You might not die*, says the voice of reason, or perhaps the voice of hope. *She may return your feelings. Maybe she has to declare them to break the curse.*

*Then why hasn't she said it?*

My face catches on a reflection. There's one good reason.

*But she has to love you for who you truly are.*

And what am I? Not a monster, perhaps. But not human.

But hers. Utterly hers. Always hers.

I start to plan out my confession. I can't pack how I feel about Rose into three little words. She deserves more. She'll *need* more. I can't merely spurt out my feelings and pray she will reply.

I turn to the books, searching for inspiration, other people's words to steal, and walk around my room, practising.

I really hope the fairies aren't watching.

"Rose, I must tell you, before you leave, that I have come to care for you as I have cared for no one else. I have tried to tell you this, many times, but I do not think you fully understand the scope, the depth, of my feelings for you. It matters not if you can return the sentiment, and I will not pressure you to in any way, but it must be known. The unspoken words between us are agony against my heart, and I must speak them.

"Rose, I love you, with all that I am, with all my soul. I did not know the shape of myself until I knew you, until I saw myself through your eyes. I knew the seasons before you came, but I had never known the sun. You are the light of my life; the music, the colour. Every other good thing in the world is a shadow next to you. You are folded into the fabric of my heart, and there you shall remain until I am naught but dust. When I die, and my earthly body crumbles, whatever I am shall remain with you. My only hope is that you allow it too, that you somehow return my feelings. I want to be with you in whatever way I can. Whatever sliver of affection you can afford, I will take. And if you do not..."

*My Rose, my darling, my doom. I am so glad I met you, and so sorry. My heart is inexorably entwined with yours. It is not your fault.*



On the day of the full moon, the two of us pack enough food to last us an entire day and spend all of it outside. We eat breakfast in the orchard and read aloud poems of summer and nature, before heading to the lake for another swimming session. Rose almost makes it to the island in the centre, before quietly panicking and turning back. She rarely wears her panic, rarely lets anyone see it. She just freezes momentarily and moves away from whatever unnerves her. I wonder how much she's been afraid of

that no one has noticed, if anyone at all knows of the fears she shares with me.

We have a long, slow, hazy lunch, savouring every delectable morsel and crumb and treating ourselves to a delicate champagne. It pairs perfectly with everything.

We try to pretend this isn't likely the last time we'll do this, what with me usually needing a day to recover from the change, and the ball to plan. We keep the conversation light and avoid anything that sounds like goodbye.

"It's beautiful," says Rose, and sidles up against me. Before I quite understand what's happened, she's curled into my arms. Her gaze fixes firmly on the lake. "Everything is so beautiful here."

Bramble nuzzles against my leg. I inhale the scent of Rose's hair, mint and apple blossom, and grasp at the thin warmth of her against my chest. I feel like it will cave beneath the pressure. This moment is so pure, so perfect, that I don't want it to end. But it is a glass bauble of a moment, spinning towards the ground.

The sun slithers behind the mountains. Darkness trails in, not far behind. Fireflies blossom along the surface of the lake. The moon, larger and more intrusive than ever, glares down.

"Rose—" I start.

"Not yet," she replies, snuggling into my chest.

"It's time."

She nods silently, packing up our things, setting off in the direction of the crypt. There's no time to head back to the castle, and no reason to either.

A storm rumbles overhead. Bramble growls.

Rose rubs his head. "Head back to the castle, boy."

Bramble looks up at the sky doubtfully, and then at me, as if weighing up his options.

"Go on," Rose urges him. "It's all right."

He soon scampers off, his head bowed slightly, as if he's ashamed of abandoning his mistress.

"Perhaps you should join him," I suggest. "You don't want to get caught in a storm."

"I don't mind."

I want to slide my fingers into hers, like I have seen so many other lovers do, but my hands are not fashioned like theirs. That action is beyond me. But I grasp her hand, folding my huge palms around hers, and she squeezes back.

Do friends hold hands like this? Can I ask her that?

Lightning splits through the sky, followed shortly by a downpour. The day has been so hot that it sizzles on the stone. We are still five minutes or so from our destination.

“Quickly, over here—” I pull her into a nearby bandstand, sheltering her under my arms. At least the size of them is good for something. Time is ticking away from us. “It might blow over soon,” I tell her.

She places her head against my chest. “I’m in no hurry.”

Suddenly, I’m in no hurry either, but I know we’ll have to go. We wait as long as we dare, the lightning and thunder growing closer and closer, and then finally we race out, hand in hand as we dash towards the graveyard.

Something flashes across our path. Rose screams. “Thorn!”

Lightning strikes a nearby tree, as straight and sure as an arrow. The whole thing comes crashing down. In an instant, Rose’s hand is yanked from mine. I’m dragged under, swallowed under branches and bark. Something hard and sharp sears against my calf, and the rising smell of smoke curls through the air.

Another roar of thunder slashes through the sky, and hands scramble about the foliage, Rose’s scream following them.

“I’m... I’m all right—” I reach for her hand, and her face appears before me. “I’m stuck. My leg—”

“Thorn, the tree is on fire.”

I squirm against the branches. None are too wide. “I know. Don’t worry. I think I can get myself out—”

“It’s really on fire!” Rose snatches her hand back, snapping the twigs, following the rest of me down to my leg. She stops shortly, her eyes wide. “Oh, oh no...”

“Rose, Rose! It’s all right.” I fumble desperately for her hand, clutching it closely. I won’t be able to feel my leg if I’m holding onto her. “In a few minutes, I’ll change. I’m stronger then. I can get myself out. But listen—you cannot be here when that happens.”

Rose is trembling. Tears line her face. “I am not leaving you like this!”

I swallow, wishing I could explain how much that means to me. But there isn't time. Or the words. "Rose, you have to."

"The tree is on fire and you're bleeding really badly—"

"I'm aware. It's fine, I can't feel it—"

"I can."

"Please." I groan. My leg is really starting to hurt. "Go back to the castle. I need to know you're safe."

"Thorn... you could die."

"Please, Rose!" Pain grips my head. I curl inwards, still clutching her hand. For a moment, she is my tether. But I need her to leave. "Rose!"

Rose closes her eyes, and turns away. She starts to run.

The smoke burns. My blood boils. I feel myself slipping away—

A scream rips through me, making Rose still, just for a second.

I urge the change to come faster, just the once, to get me free before I burn to death. But then I see Rose still weaving her way towards the castle, and I need her to be safe first.

*Crash.*

Another tree swerves in front of her, cutting across her path. She turns left, towards the kitchens. *Good. Smart. Keep moving.*

Lightning strikes the steps before she can reach them. A chasm opens between her and the door.

*No!*

She wheels back towards the graveyard. How is this happening? This is not normal, not natural.

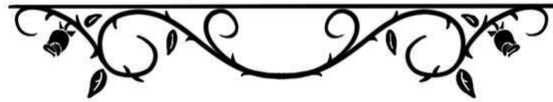
Moya. This is her doing.

*If you hurt her, I will find a way to destroy you. I swear it.*

But I'm in no condition to do this now. Pain floods me, and I let it. I want to destroy.



## ROSE



I close my eyes when I tear myself away from Thorn, because there's no way I can move unless I can't see him. His barely-contained screams rip through the air between us as I run, and it feels like my bones are breaking.

*Crash.*

Another tree swerves in front of me, cutting my path. I turn left. I can get in through the kitchen.

Lightning strikes the steps before I can reach them. A chasm opens between me and the door. This can't be happening—

I wheel back towards the graveyard. I can hide in the dungeon. I am mere inches from the door when the statue beside it explodes. I crush down on my knees and try to pull apart the wreckage. The stone is white hot.

Against the pounding wind, I hear something growling. A dark shape darts behind a tomb. Another flash of lightning illuminates a trail of blood.

At least I know he's escaped.

A ruined chapel sits a few yards away. It has no door, nothing the lightning can attack. If I can get in there, I should be safe from this weather. I can barricade myself in the crypt there, wait it out till morning

—

I make a dash for it. The storm is relentless. Each statue I pass explodes, rubble litters my way. This isn't natural.

Thorn follows me, but I don't turn to look. I mustn't.

I dive into the chapel, cursing its lack of doors, and charge towards the crypt entrance. A window shatters. Pews skid. My foot hits a seat and I go flying, wrenching myself up just in time to see Thorn sailing over me. He lands in front of my escape. Not thinking, I move backwards, tripping into the debris. My back hits the wall. There is nowhere for me to go.

"Thorn—" I hold up my hands. "It's me, it's Rose. You know me, I know you do."

He doesn't appear to. He creeps towards me, his back leg dragging. Snarling, growling. No trace of the real him. Not a flicker of recognition.

"Thorn, you don't want to hurt me. You were willing to risk your life to keep me safe... I was willing to risk mine to save you." He does nothing but move closer. "Thorn, dearest, just listen—"

He's so close, I am running short of ideas. I am terrified. I can't let him hurt me. I don't want to die, and if given the choice, I would choose any death other than this. He will die if he kills me. I know, because I feel the same.

*Do something. Anything!*

When he was chasing me before, nothing stopped him. Not my screams, not the door, not even me slicing his arm. He continued his pursuit all the way to—

To the chamber. He stopped hammering against the door when the music box was playing. I don't have the music box now, but I remember the tune.

I start to hum.

He slows, but does not stop. I raise my voice against the crescendo of the storm, louder and louder with each crash of lightning. Another window shatters, then another. The wind tears at the building, howling, screaming, but he pays no attention. His eyes are fixed on me, like a sailor's might fix on a lighthouse.

There is the tiniest, faintest flicker. He pauses.

"Thorn?"

For a second, his eyes look blue. His mouth opens, not to snarl, but as if to speak.

I keep singing.



Thorn shakes his head, as if trying to wriggle the song out of his mind. He snorts, splutters. I call out his name.

He looks at me, somewhere between monster and man, and leaps out the window.

I sit in the dark, covered in tiny shards, the rain still battering relentlessly against the roof. I hear him howling in the distance, louder and more lonely than any storm.

Slowly, carefully, I have to get up. I shake the glass off my clothing. I am unhurt, bruised at most. There is no way I can risk returning to the castle, no way I can help him now.

As I walk towards the crypt, I feel like I am stepping into my own grave. When I close the gate, it makes a sound like a nail against a coffin.



Somehow, I grab a few hours of sleep, but it does not feel like rest. I half-wake continuously, treading the lines between sleeping and waking. I think I dream, but I cannot be sure. My thoughts are jumbled, but my heart is pounding, and my clothes coil around me.

I wake at dawn. A blue, watery light filters through the bars, swamping the flagstones. The minute it's light enough, I get up and leave my makeshift prison. The chapel is awash with glass, and dotted with dark droplets of blood. I follow the trail outside. It's a little hard in places, obscured by the gravel and glass. I know I should be relieved—this means he is not bleeding badly, right?—but fear still gnaws at my insides. I shall not be relieved until I find him.

I hear Bramble barking in the distance, and call out to him until he appears. He does not come to me, but continues to yelp until I follow him into the orchard. A dark shape lies slumped under one of the apple trees, in ragged, blood-streaked clothing. He moves slightly, lifting up his head until his eyes rest on mine, but no relief comes.

“Oh, Thorn...”

He is still when I approach him, still when I reach out to touch his matted hair. His eyes are deep blue now, but they are far away and glazed

over. He is damp, clammy, and completely unaware.

“Rose?” he croaks eventually. “W—what happened? Are you all right? Why am I—”

“I’m fine,” I say quickly. “You’re fine. You’re going to be fine.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him gently. He does not hold me back. I am terrified of hurting him, but tug gingerly at his arm and pull him up. He follows my motion, rising to his feet, but collapses seconds later, whimpering. His leg is bloody and oozing. He cannot place any weight on it.

“Thorn!”

Bramble circles round to his other side, slips under his arm, and licks his cheek. Thorn lacks the energy to even acknowledge him. His eyes keep circling back into their sockets.

“Help, please!” I call out.

In a matter of seconds, the three little fairies appear out of nowhere. They buzz under his arms, and together, the four of us somehow pull him to his feet. It is a long, slow limp back to the castle, and several times Thorn stops, completely lost, as if he has forgotten I am even here.

I finally get him into his room and sit him down on the bed, where he goes limp, resting against the bedpost with a dazed, unfocused gaze. It’s impossible to get him into the bath, but the little sprites summon a basin of hot water, presumably from the fountain. They hover uselessly by his side, while I pick out glass from his wounds with a pair of tweezers. Every so often, he makes a slight moan when I remove a particularly large piece. It’s the only sound he makes.

I clean the wounds as best I can, smearing them with ointment provided by the fairies, and bandaging the worst of them. His leg is a horrible, pulsing mess. My basin is dark by the end of the process. He looks almost like a mummy, swathed in bandages.

He did this to himself for me. He is hurt because of *me*.

I reason that this is the lesser of two evils, that this is what Thorn would have wanted, that it is not my fault. But that does not change the fact that he is hurt. Because of me.

I take one of his hands in mine and kiss it. “Thorn,” I whisper. “Thorn, my dearest, I am so sorry. If I had only—”

A finger reaches down and wipes a tear from my cheek. “You’re safe,” he says softly. “You are all that matters.”

“You matter,” I say. It hurts to speak. I’m going to start sobbing soon and if I do, I will not stop. *You matter so much.*

I put my head against his neck and breathe him in. A soft hand presses against my back. I refuse to let myself cry any more in front of him. He is in more pain than I am. My tears are useless.

“I’m just going to get something,” I say, easing back. “I won’t be long.”

Thorn nods. I know he doesn’t want me to leave, but I need to collect myself. I go back to my room to change my clothes and tidy myself up. I barely recognise the girl in the mirror, covered in dirt and dry blood, hopelessly pale. I take a minute to freshen up and erase any trace of my tears, before grabbing a book and heading back.

Thorn is still resting against the bedpost when I return, and I have been gone much longer than I expected. He startles when I walk in. Bramble is lying at his feet, head in his paws, looking incredibly helpless and forlorn. He is a perfect reflection of how I feel.

Thorn blinks. “You came back.”

“Where else would I go?” I touch his cheek.

“Elsewhere,” he mumbles. “I’m always... so scared... that you will go.”

I’m not entirely sure what he means by this, so instead I pull back the covers and ease him towards the pillows. He says nothing, eyes circling up towards the ceiling. He is burning, and I know that means I should try and keep him warm.

When I turn around to grab an extra blanket from his nest beside the hearth, I see the fairies have brought in a tray of hot soup, enough for two, and a bone for Bramble. They hover cautiously around the bowl, faint in colour.

“Thank you,” I say.

They move over to the mantelpiece, and I know they are watching him too. They always have been. I bring the tray over to Thorn’s bedside and take a spoon towards his lips. He manages a few mouthfuls, but no more. I can only do a few myself.

Thorn slips into an uneasy sleep, shaking and muttering incoherently. All I can do is be here.

I read my book aloud, because I haven’t the strength to read it silently, listening to him. This keeps me focused, distracted. It is Tromeo and Lessida, his favourite. I finished re-reading it months ago, but kept it beside my bed for some reason.

I wonder why it's his favourite? It's not a wholly remarkable story. Tromeo is a rich young nobleman, and Lessida is an intelligent healer. They are from very different worlds and are very different people, but despite this, find themselves falling in love. Then a war comes and separates them both for several years. Both believing the other to be dead or far out of reach, they attempt to move on with their lives, never forgetting each other despite the time and distance. They are only reunited with each other after several decades, when their other halves have died and their children have grown.

I suppose there might be something romantic in the longevity of their love, but it never sat well with me that they lost so much time together.

Some time later—the minutes blur together—Thorn wakes with a start.

“What? What is it?”

Thorn is on the other side of the bed, pressed against the poster, breathing heavily. His eyes are wide in fear.

“Thorn?”

“You're all right,” he breathes.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be? It's you I'm worried about.”

The fear in Thorn's eyes slowly dissipates. His shoulders relax.

“I thought... I must have been dreaming...”

My heart a little tighter than it was a minute ago, I sit up and inch forward to place a hand on his hot cheek, stroking his hair. “I'm fine,” I tell him. “You aren't. Lie back down again.”

He makes no motion to move. His eyes are glazed over, his thoughts far off. It scares me, to see him so helpless, when I want so badly to help him. My heart feels like it's spread to every corner of my body, and each part of it aches.

I notice Thorn's hair is all stuck up, down one entire side of his body, the side that was pressed to mine.

I smile a little. “You have bed hair,” I tell him, making a feeble attempt to pat it down. “It's sweet.”

Thorn's eyes slowly, briefly, catch mine. “Why aren't you afraid of me?” he asks. “Why are you so sure I won't hurt you?”

I swallow. The question hurts me. I hate it when he hates himself. “Because I know you,” I say, and this time, I lean forward and pull him carefully into my arms. I kiss the top of his cheek, smooth his hair. Slowly, he loosens, allowing me to lie him back down. He feels as small and weak

as a child. I lie down next to him, a little apart, even though I desperately want to take him in my arms again. His hand reaches out and closes around mine feebly. “Rose?”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t leave.”

I stroke his face with my free hand. “I’m not going anywhere.”



It’s night time when I wake. The clock reads two in the morning. Thorn is still sleeping, although it looks far from peaceful. Having only had a bowl of soup in the past twenty-four hours, I find myself hungry. Luckily, there is more food laid out for us. A bit of cheese and bread. I couldn’t handle much more.

I walk around the room to stretch my legs, then I sit by the window and wait for the dawn. Any more attempts at sleep would be fruitless. Black turns to blue, the night thins and pales, and faint, watery light falls from the heavens. Thorn wakes shortly after.

“Have you been there all night?”

I give him a smile almost as liquescent as the sun this grey morning. “I slept,” I tell him. “Have no fear.”

I cross the room to check his forehead, and pretend he feels cooler. “How do you feel?”

“A little better,” he says, not all that convincingly.

“You seem a little more coherent today.”

“I’m sorry if I worried you.”

“You did,” I say. “But I’m all right as long as you’re all right.”

I bring over the breakfast tray, and we eat together. Thorn can still only manage the smallest of amounts.

“My leg hurts,” he tells me.

“I’ll change your bandages for you.”

A fresh set is summoned, along with more warm, tingly waters. I inspect some of his other injuries first, finding them healing to my satisfaction. The leg, if possible, looks worse.

“Does the fountain water heal infections?” I ask, trying to sound light-hearted.

“Usually,” Thorn replies. “Why?”

“Just wondering if I should boil the water first, is all.”

Thorn smiles a little at this, and I finish cleaning the wound as best I can. I wish there was more I could do for the pain.

“Any better?”

“A little, thank you.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Just... stay with me.”

“Well,” I say breezily, crawling up onto the bed beside him. “That I can manage.”

“Are you... planning on sitting there?”

“Unless you'd rather I sit somewhere else?”

“No,” says Thorn quickly. “Nowhere else.”

I slip my hand into his and fold it around his middle, and he pretends to sleep, to spare me the pain of seeing his.



The next few days trickle by. Thorn does not improve. His appetite lessens, and he becomes cold and shivery. I barely leave his side, barely sleep, barely eat myself. I read to him, sew when he dozes, try and make light whenever I can. He does not say much, but at one point, around the third day, he turns to me.

“We may have to think of an alternative plan.”

For a moment, I’m worried he’s hallucinating. “Plan for what?”

“Our ball,” he replies, matter-of-factly. “I’m not entirely sure I’ll be up for dancing. I won’t be nearly as charming and graceful as I usually am.”

I smile at him from my seat by the window. “You must be feeling better, if you’re making jokes.”

“Jokes? I’m expressing extreme remorse. I was looking rather forward to the whole thing.”

So was I.

“I will miss seeing you in your dress.”

“I can still wear a dress. Shall I fetch it now?”

I do not fetch it. Instead, we talk and laugh for a little bit longer, and then Thorn drifts quietly into a deep sleep.

He appears to be improving over the next day or two, and although his leg remains in a bad way, he eats more, and is chattier and more coherent. I don’t relish the idea of leaving him injured, but at least he is getting better. On my last night, we make an effort to do something, anything. A decent meal arrives, we play board games in bed, and then lie there listening to beautiful music play on our music box. We talk until we run out of energy, both avoiding anything that sounds like goodbye.

“Rose?” Thorn asks tiredly. “You won’t... you won’t leave before I wake, will you?”

“Of course not,” I tell him, almost crossly.

“Good,” he relaxes a little more. “I have a few things to tell you, before you go.”

“I might have a few things, too.”

His eyes close, and I can feel sleep pulling at mine, too, but I don’t want to sleep. I want to stay here, watching him, *being* with him. Planning how on earth I’ll say goodbye.

I don’t want to.

But sleep comes anyway, and all too soon dawn invades the room, and my eyes drift up to the window to a sight I have almost forgotten. A stream dividing a meadow, leading up a wood. Behind the wood, I can see the dim outline of a spire.

*Home.*

The clock on the mantle chimes six. I let out a little sob. We have lost our final time together. I pry myself from Thorn’s side and step towards the glass. *Go away.*

I look back to the bed. Thorn is shivering. How can I leave him like this? But he said the way would be open for hours. We still have time. Perhaps he just needs a little more rest, he’ll wake up soon, a little tired and dozy, but clearly well enough. We can say a quick goodbye and then—

And then what? I leave this place forever? I promise to return in six months? How can I possibly leave him like this? How can I leave him at all?

I creep back to his bedside and put my hand against his head. He is burning up.

“Thorn?” There is a touch of desperation in my voice that I cannot hide.

He does not respond, does not give any indication that he notices me at all. I give him a shake. “Thorn! Wake up! Please!”

Still nothing. I race around to the other side of the bed and yank his leg out of the covers. He lets out a low, painful moan. The flesh under the wound is swollen beyond recognition.

“Oh, oh no...”

One of the sprites hovers overhead. It’s Ariel, I’m sure it is. I look at her, and her little form bobs. She knows what I don’t say. I run to the Hall of Mirrors, arriving breathlessly at her frame.

“Oh Rose—” she flutters.

“Help me!”

“I don’t know how—”

“There must be something here, some kind of pharmacy or something —”

“There is, but—”

“Take me there.”

“But—”

“Now!”

Her minute form dashes away down the corridor, almost too quick to follow. She leads me to a small study not far from the kitchen. It is in complete disarray. Books are everywhere, the shelves, the desk, the windowsill, the bed. Illustrations of herbs are pinned on the walls. The medicine cabinet is a mess, bottles of every size and colour, all of which have labels faded beyond recognition.

“Dammit!”

“I tried to tell you,” Ariel hisses, “We’ve been raiding the supplies for days—”

“Then we’ll make something!” I look around at the books. One of them must hold something helpful, but I do not have time to look through them all. Ariel buzzes around the room, scanning every spine.

“This one, this one!” she squeaks, tapping on a thick tome.

I haul it off the shelf and slam it onto the nearby desk. I head straight for the index, skimming for the word *infection*. I have never turned pages faster.



“A *salve to treat infection*,” I read aloud. I scan through the ingredients, only recognising what some of them are. “Ariel, I don’t know most of these ingredients!”

“I do,” she asserts, “and we have most of them.”

“Most of them?”

“Enough. We have enough. If we brew it with the water from the fountain—” She heads towards the cabinet, pulling out various bottoms, unstoppering them. “This, and this, and this—” she flutters back towards the book. “Ah.”

“Ah?”

“We need *Aspria*. It’s a herb. It used to grow in the garden.”

“Used to?”

“I haven’t seen it in a while, but it might still be there—”

“What does it look like?”

She hovers around one of the illustrations on the wall. “Like this.”

“Find the rest of the ingredients,” I say, tearing it loose. “I’ll be back.”

How many hours have I spent out in these gardens? How many days? I don’t know this plant. I’ve never seen it before, but I have to find it. I have to.

I race out into the grounds, heading immediately for the herb garden next to the kitchens. I clutch at every stem, every leaf, holding it against the image. Nothing matches.

Remembering the untamed foliage that clambers around the stone, I rush to the graveyard. Wild lavender taunts me. The ivy mocks me. Nothing tries to aid me, nothing at all. I have a faint memory of spasms of herb-looking things growing down by the banks in the river, and dash there next. Nothing but reeds and rushes. The woodlands turn up empty. Nothing grows wild in the maze, I know, and the rest of the gardens are so stiff and manicured I am sure I would have noticed something, anything.

If Thorn dies, I will die. I may continue to breathe, and my heart may continue to beat, but whatever made me, *me*, will be as cold as he is. I will not lose a part of myself, but all of it. I will be a shell without a soul.

I search the illustration for some other clue, anything. *Aspira*, says the faded grey writing at the bottom. *Often found growing among wildflowers.*

Wildflowers. The meadow.

My chest feels like it is breaking. I have never run so fast in my life. My sides are splitting, but I barely notice. I have no idea how much time I

have. The warm, tall grass rushes up to greet me. The stream echoes around me, peering through the gathering fog. So close to home.

I grab fistfuls of the meadow in my hands, pulling it up, frantically searching. I see poppies and buttercups and cowslips and sorrel. I see nothing like the spidery leaves of this Aspira.

A voice calls to me through the fog. "Rose!"

Through the mist, on the other side of the stream, I see a tall, grey figure. My imagination, surely.

"Rose!" The voice is clearer now.

"Freed?" I can almost make out his face. "Freedom, I'm here!"

"Come here!" he calls. "Come home!"

"I'm coming!" I cry. "I'm coming, I promise! It just... it might take me a while. I'm safe, I promise! I'll be home soon!"

"Where are you?"

The fog swallows him up. I cannot stop for him now. My eyes fall onto a sparse patch of spidery leaves. They are so small... I gather up a fistful. Is this it? It looks so much like it, but there is so little...

It will have to be enough. It must be. I race back to the castle, straight into the pharmacy. Ariel has gathered all the other ingredients in a bowl. "Did you find it?" she asks.

I hold it up. "I think so. I hope it's enough."

"I do, too."

I quickly wash and strip the herb, slamming it into the bowl and mashing it up. Ariel gushes instructions as I add it to the pan of simmering water. The other two sprites appear to ferret it upstairs. I race back to join them, heart pounding against every inch of all that I am.

All three little forms hover over Thorn's immobile body, trying to tip a teacup of the liquid into his mouth. Ariel leaves the others to gesture towards a pot filled with the dregs.

"Quickly, Rose, apply the paste!"

I throw back the covers. There is the quietest of moans when I hold Thorn's leg. He's still alive.

Not needing to be told twice, I unravel the remains of the bandage and apply the medicine in thick clumps. I smear it over the wound, covering the whole of it. Thorn barely makes a sound, not even as I wrap the bandage tightly around him.

Something clinks behind me. The fairies are refilling the cup. “He won’t drink!” one of them calls out desperately.

I snatch the whole teapot from mid-air and press it to his lips, prying them open. The liquid trickles down his cheeks.

“Thorn, you have to drink this.” My voice is stretched. “Please, Thorn!”

“Tilt his head!”

This is no easy feat. He’s so heavy. A dead weight. *No, not dead, not yet.*

In the end, I scramble into the bed, stick my knees under his shoulders, and pull him into my arms. I tilt his head back in my lap and ram the spout into his mouth. Water creeps out of the corners. “Please!”

“It’s not working.”

“It has to!”

I need to get him to swallow. I need to get him to wake up. I barely know what I am doing when I wrench away the pot and cover his mouth with my own.

*Wake up. Drink. Breathe.*

Ariel gasps.

I breathe into Thorn, and I feel his own chest rise with my breath. His body moves under mine. I pull back, he splutters, coughs up most of the liquid, and then looks at me.

I wrap a hand around his neck, placing the pot back against his mouth.

“You need to drink,” I tell him.

He nods, and slowly and carefully, he takes it.



I sleep in her arms, more restful than I have been in days. I think I try to tell her that I love her, but she sings me to sleep instead.

But I want to tell her. My courage may be gone when I wake. If I tell her I love her now, I'm not sure it will matter if she doesn't say it back. My heart is too well held to break. And if it does... I will die here, in her arms, as I feel I was always meant to. No other death for me but her.

I drift back to consciousness, quietly, steadily. The room is humming. I hear voices.

"That was a very brave thing you did last night, my dear."

*Margaret?*

Rose is stroking my face. It's nice. I hope she won't stop when she knows I'm awake. "Wouldn't you have stayed?"

There is a slight pause before she replies. "Yes," she says firmly, "I would have. But my reasons for saving him... might not be the same as yours."

"I don't know what you mean."

"By the time you do, it may be too late."

I murmur something, testing my voice.

"Well," Margaret says quickly, "we have plenty to be getting on with. Come on, girls..."

They vanish with a crack, before I can stop them. I open my eyes, blinking up at Rose. She is wrapped up beside me.

“Who are you talking to?” I ask.

Rose smiles. “I believe they said their names were Ariel, Ophelia and Margaret.”

“They can talk again?”

“Quite a bit, apparently.”

“We’ll never have a moment’s peace now.” I try to pretend I’m not thrilled, but I don’t think it works. I shift upwards, leaning back against the pillows, enjoying feeling halfway normal. The last few days come sliding back, thick and hazy, details obscured by pain and fever. “What... what day is it?”

Rose looks away. “The gateway opened yesterday.”

“Oh, Rose, I didn’t know—” *Hoped I was wrong, for your sake—*

“It’s all right.”

“You should have—”

“It’s all right.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“It’s all right!”

But her face betrays what her words will not, and a second later her heart goes spilling out everywhere into guttural, noisy sobs.

She cries for what feels like hours, almost as erratically as I did when my mother disappeared. Raw, insensible, unadulterated grief. She goes completely limp in my arms, and I hold her until the cries subside.

She eases back, brushing away her tears. “I think... I think I’m done now.”

I was so, so grateful when she stayed, but now all I feel is the sheer guilt of what she has given up for me. Seeing her so miserable makes me almost wish she had just left. It would be easier to die than watch her like this.

“You... you should have gone.”

“I couldn’t,” she snuffles.

“Why not?” *Say it, please. Tell me why.*

Rose turns away from me. “You shouldn’t ask me that.”

“I’m sorry.” I pause, pondering the meaning of her words. “Is it because you promised me that you wouldn’t leave, because I didn’t mean—”

Rose scuttles to her feet. “What sort of person do you think I am?” Her tone is venomous. “Do you think I am devoid of feeling? Do you think I am cold, heartless? That I have come to feel nothing for you? I was scared you were going to *die*, Thorn! I could never have left you! I didn’t... the

thought didn't even cross my mind, you know? All... all I could think about was you. If I could think at all."

I inch forward. "Rose—"

"It's all right," she snaps. "I just... I need to..."

But what she needs, I never quite discover. She sweeps out of the room a moment later.



She stayed for me. She gave up a chance to see her family again, for me. She said anyone would have done the same, but would they? Would anyone sit by my side, hour after hour, a warm presence in the gloom? Would anyone else share my bed, hold me like she did, so unafraid and so caring?

But then my heart plummets. Does it matter how much she cares for me? She has just given up her family for my sake. I fear she may never forgive me.

*You could let her go*, says a voice at the back of my head. *You did it before. There's enough magic for you to do it again—*

But if I let her go, I will die. Would she forgive me for that?

If she ever found out.

*"What sort of person do you think I am?"*

She is a good person, the sort that would never leave someone to die, perhaps not even a complete stranger. Perhaps she believes everyone would do the same as she. I'm not sure Grace would have left, if she'd known what it cost me, and that was just flowers and company. Rose would never have forgiven herself if she'd let me die.

But still... *All I could think about was you.*

Is it too much to hope that perhaps she feels the same?

Rose has been gone mere seconds when three buzzing balls of light come streaming out of nowhere. One of them races around my head, nuzzling my cheeks.

"Thoooooorn!" Ophelia's unmistakably cheerful sing-song voice is a melody to my ears. It has been so long since I've heard it.

I smile, holding out my hand. "You never called me that before."

"But I really, really like it! It really suits you!"

"I'm glad you approve."

"So, she's the one, right? The one we have been waiting for?"

Margaret tutters in the corner by the teapot. "Ophelia, you've said that about the last six."

"But this one's my favourite..."

I can almost see her small, pouting face. I can almost see them all. Ophelia whizzes back to Margaret's side, helping her with the tea. Ariel hovers beside me. I can feel her invisible glare.

"So," I begin, "I imagine, now that you can talk again, you have a lot to say."

"Oh, dear boy, I have a *list*."

"I was afraid of that."

"Where to begin, where to begin, OH WAIT, I KNOW. This beautiful maiden that you have ensnared—"

"I have not ensnared her!"

"Semantics, boy, semantics."

"I'm not sure I like being called *boy*. I'm fairly sure my mother wouldn't approve, if she were still around."

"Well, I knew your mother much better than you, and she always greatly appreciated my sass—"

"I find this difficult to believe."

"Be that as it may, my point remains. Rose. Here. Girl. Beautiful. Likes books. Doesn't run from the sight of you. What more do you want in a mate?"

"Ariel..." I say warningly.

"Why haven't you told her how you feel?"

I exhale deeply. I barely know the full answer to this, I only know that I am afraid. Terrified of telling her. Ariel seems to read this answer.

"What do you have to lose?"

"Everything," I reply. "Everything that I am, that this place is... it hangs on her response."

"But that's her response. Not your confession."

"And if she doesn't return the sentiment?" I try to forget the feeling of my heart breaking, when I thought that she had gone before. It is not an

experience I'm keen to repeat. "I need to... I need to be sure, before I frighten her away."

"She seems fairly fearless. I'm not sure she would run, whatever you told her."

"If that's the case, and she feels the same, I wonder why she hasn't spoken up herself."

"She is scared, I think," Ariel replies. "Although I'm not sure of what, yet."

I think of Grace's words. She too said that Rose was afraid, but she didn't say what of. I have an idea, but I am not sure enough to speak it. It is too much like wishful thinking.

"Thorn's in love!" Ophelia hands me a teacup and skims around the brim, apparently oblivious to the conversation that's just transpired. "Finally! After all this time! Oh, we're going to have bodies again, and parties, and the others will return, and maybe the Queen—"

"Slow down, 'Phelia," Margaret says softly. "You are getting ahead of yourself."

"I've been waiting years to be this happy!"

"Nevertheless, you mustn't celebrate prematurely—"

"You're right." She comes to a sudden stop, then whizzes towards me. "I'll celebrate when we're free! Thorn, go and tell Rose you love her, right now!"

"Ophelia—" says Margaret warningly.

"Why? What's he waiting for?"

"He's afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of her not loving him back."

Ophelia's little form seems to pale. "But... but she *must*," she insists, her voice wavering. "Why wouldn't she?"

Ophelia's optimism prickles in my chest. It has been so long since I have spoken with them that I had forgotten how lovely she could be.

"Well, there's a couple of reasons," says Ariel realistically. "I mean, he's not playing the prince card, for one. Girls like a financially stable husband."

"I hear they also like men the same species as they are," I add.

"That too."



“Hmm,” says Margaret, “if only we had some way of actually asking her...”

“Oh, fine,” Ariel sighs defeatedly. “I’ll do it.”

A wave of nerves trembles inside me. “Do... what, precisely?”

“Befriend Rose. Learn what’s going on in that head of hers. Report back. Spy on her...”

“You sound way too delighted at this prospect.”

Margaret mutters something about just asking Rose outright as Ariel twirls around the bedpost. “Girl’s got to have some fun.”

“Ariel, have you ever actually talked to a human being? They have... feelings, you know.”

“I have feelings! Somewhere! Around.”

“I’m not sure you befriending Rose is the best of ideas.”

“Why not? I already like her. We’ve talked. Ophelia isn’t the most cunning of people and Margaret’s too... Margaret.”

“Thank you, Ariel.”

“You’re welcome.”

Margaret, still tutting under her breath, whisks the tea tray away. Ophelia nuzzles my face and vanishes with her. It is only me and Ariel.

“She cares about you, you know,” she says. “Went crazy when you were...”

“I don’t doubt that.” I sigh, staring at the empty fireplace. “I’m just not sure it’s enough.”

“Her brother came for her, you know. Called to her across the gateway.”

“I know.”

“He was very attractive.”

I have no idea why this is relevant. Luckily, she carries on.

“I don’t think she would have given up that chance for anyone.”

But I think she would have. I would never have left someone to die alone, not even Isabella, Miranda or Angelica or someone who despised me. I would have given them another six months of my life, not to bear the guilt of desertion.

Ariel’s form shrivels, and I sense she is about to disappear. She’s spent too long voiceless, I’m sure she’s forgotten that one usually says goodbye.

“Ariel?”

Her form expands again. “Yes?”

“It’s really good to see you again.”

Her light brightens, and I can almost feel her smile. “It’s good to be seen.”



Rose returns to my side the following morning, silently sweeping into the room and depositing herself in the chair beside the hearth, tucking her legs underneath her and whipping out a book. There is nothing about her demeanour that suggests she stormed out of here the day before.

I stare at her solidly for a long while. “Are you still cross with me?”

Rose raises her eyes from her book, barely looking at me. “You should know by now that I am rarely cross with you.”

My throat feels tight. “I didn’t know that.” I say. “What are you angry about, then?”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

“Could you—”

“Thorn,” she says quietly, “please don’t.”

I nod. What else can I do? As much as I want to crack open that head of hers and spill every thought and secret into the space between us, I can’t. I don’t merely want to know what’s going on in her head. I want her to share it.

“The fairies have been in,” I remark instead. “I never thought I’d hear their voices again. I truly believed they were lost to this world.”

“Who are they, to you?” she asks.

“My family,” I reply. “Or as near as I had to one, until...”

“Until you met me?”

“Yes.” I don’t think I hide the longing in my voice.

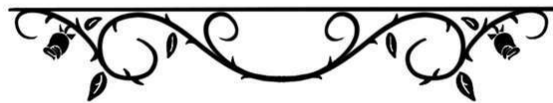
“It’s all right,” says Rose, meeting my gaze only for a moment, “I feel the same.”

The weight of her words slides through me like a blade, beautiful and awful, all at once. I want to be her family. But I’m increasingly worried that she sees me only as that; as something familial. A brother, maybe. Like the one who came for her.

Neither of us says what we both must be thinking: that Rose already has a family, a family that is missing her. A family she longs to return to.



## ROSE



By the time Thorn is well enough to go outside again, the gardens have been transformed. They are more beautiful than ever. We wander down to the lake, and take a path we have never taken before. It was completely overgrown a week ago. The fairies have been busy.

The path stops just before the shore. There is a small stone building there, guarded by two statues of grand, regal fairies. It is clearly a tomb, but different from the others in the main graveyard. I have the strangest sense it wasn't built by tool. It has been crafted by some other means, for some other purpose.

I look to Thorn, and without waiting for any kind of permission, try the door. I expect to see something bleak, eerie, dismal. Instead, I find myself in a smooth, round chamber, filled with natural light. The roof, what is left of it, is glass, and ivy tumbles in and wraps around the opening of a shallow pool. It looks almost natural, but there is a clear, man-made incline, and a statue, sitting with its legs half in the water. A speck of light touches his half-hidden face.

"Incredible," I breathe.

"I had forgotten this," says Thorn, moving into the room. His voice has a strange, unearthly quality. He steps forward, a hand reaching towards the statue. At the last minute, just as his nails touch the stone, he pulls back. I am not sure if I imagine it, but I think his hand trembles.

"What is it?" I ask.

“Nothing,” he replies, a little too quickly. He turns his back and looks up at the ceiling, admiring what, I don’t know.

I move closer to the statue and pull the ivy from its face. It is male, I realise, as I work down. He is broad-shouldered, with long limbs, elegantly postured. He reminds me of a merman. There is something beautiful in the way he sits, so naturally although he is carved of stone. But it is his face I admire most. It is strong, with a straight nose, large eyes, cheekbones both soft and angular. At first, I think he is familiar, but the moment quickly scuttles away.

“Who is he?” I ask.

Thorn still does not turn around. “His name was Leo Valerdene,” he says, after a pause so long I wonder if he will answer at all. “Or so the story says. He was a great lover of nature who one day, quite by accident, wandered into the realm of the fairies. The Queen of the Fairies found him bathing in the lake, and they were instantly smitten with each other. Now, the Queen of the Fairies had had many lovers in her lifetime, but none like him. They courted for many years, and, eventually, she decided to make him her husband. There was some outrage, of course. A human? In the court of fairies? For years, he had been looked on as little more than a favoured pet, someone who would leave as soon as the Queen tired of him. But now, after centuries of life, she had finally chosen a husband, and a human no less. Would they even be able to have children, provide an heir for the throne? Fairies can live a long time, and as such, have never been the most fertile of creatures. But the Queen cared not for any of this. She loved him so. The court came to understand this.”

“They accepted him?”

“They were married for ten years.”

“What happened then?”

Thorn pauses. “He died,” he says eventually. “The Queen built this place to mark his tomb, and remember the moment she had fallen in love with him.”

“It is a beautiful tomb.”

“I am told it is a beautiful story.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t like stories that end in death.”

This, at least, I can understand. I reach out to touch Leo’s face, imagining it when it was made of flesh. It feels a little wrong, touching

someone else's lover, but there is something in this face that calls to me.

Thorn has turned around. "Do you find him handsome?" There is no note of jealousy in his voice, no note of anything.

"Yes," I say. Thorn snorts, almost irritably, and sweeps out of the room.



That night, as I sleep, I dream I am down by the lake. It is high summer, the sky is golden, and the water shimmers in the evening light. I dream I am swimming with Leo Valerdene, not as the Fairy Queen, but as myself. He chases me, laughing, his hands skimming my bare flesh. His touch is pure sunlight.

I stop suddenly, treading water. Something isn't right.

"What's wrong?" asks Leo. His voice rumbles through me.

"This is wrong."

"Why?"

"You aren't... you're not him."

"Who?"

"Thorn. I shouldn't... I shouldn't be dreaming of you. It isn't right."

Leo laughs, and suddenly, his voice isn't foreign, his laugh is familiar. Thorn's laugh. "Rose," he says, pulling me towards him, "It's all right. It's me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm Thorn, silly." He leans forward in the water, his hands sliding round my back. His face glistens, and his beautiful blue eyes sing into my very soul. "Can't you see?"

All at once, I can see, of course it's him, why couldn't I see it before? I place my hand against his cheek, and feel no surprise at feeling skin rather than fur, but when his fingers move to wipe back my hair, my flesh sings. Before another word can be uttered between us, our mouths slide together and we are kissing. The kiss covers all of me. The warmth of his mouth spreads outwards, inwardly, pouring down into the tips of my fingers, the ends of my toes. I am undone, foldable, as malleable as clay. His kiss is a flame amongst the hay.

I awake hotly in my room, the weight of the phantom kiss still spreading through me.



“Did you sleep well, last night?” Thorn asks coyly at breakfast the next morning.

“W-what? Why? Why would you ask that?”

“Your hair is all over the place.”

“Oh!” I furiously pat it down. “I just... I... never mind.”

“You’re very skittish this morning. Are you quite all right? You look flushed–”

“Well, the weather is getting awfully warm!”

I fan myself desperately, feeling the colour rise to my cheeks.

“All right,” Thorn shrugs, and finally sits down to eat. He looks almost smug, as if he is inside my thoughts.

I cannot help but search his features for any trace of this strange man I saw last night, but it is no good. He simply looks like Thorn to me. And yet, I was so sure, in that moment, that this other person was Thorn. I eat my breakfast as quickly as I can, not feeling particularly hungry, and then go back upstairs and run myself a bath. I have got to calm down.

“You realise your bath is cold, right?” Ariel hovers at my shoulder.

“Quite aware.”

“Your voice sounds strange.”

“Does it?”

I suppose it does. It’s high and quick, like I cannot say the words fast enough. Ariel helps me out of the dress and soon I am under the water. It is unpleasant, but I instantly feel better. Ariel adds some kind of oil, lavender, I think. The temperature heats up a little.

“I had a strange dream last night,” I tell my tiny companion.

“What about?”

“I... I couldn’t say.” A few more minutes tick by. Ariel hums a dainty tune. “I often have dreams here, dreams that... are different, from the ones I had back home. Dreams that feel a little bit... real.”

Ariel bobs, as if she is nodding. "You're asking if your dreams are real?"

"I'm asking if there's any truth to them, or if they're just... wishful thinking."

"A bit of both. Some of your dreams are just dreams... some a little more than that."

"Why is that? How can my dreams be anything other than just dreams?"

"You are... connected to this place," Ariel explains, "And the magic that sustains it. You are in the gardens and the walls and mirrors, in the old air that used to house the most powerful beings in the world. A little bit was bound to rub off on you, sooner or later."

I am not entirely sure what she means, but I think I understand. I am doing something to the castle, somehow. But I do not think I am doing it alone.





I ponder on Rose's reaction to Leo's statue as I struggle to sleep. She was clearly drawn to him, admitting that she found him attractive. Does that bother me? Why did I ask?

I suppose as I have always imagined his face to be mine, or close to it, I wanted to know if she found *me* attractive, if she would like me when she breaks the spell.

*If she breaks the spell.*

There were memories of my father's that I played repeatedly in the mirrors: the moments when he was happiest. Playing with his siblings as a child, listening to his grandparents' stories, composing poems in the woods, meeting my mother, marrying her, laughing with the fairies, learning I was coming.

There was one memory I never asked to see, not until I was almost an adult myself.

"Show me how my father died."

Mother was away, some fairy skirmish outside our borders. Arranged, of course, by Moya. She snuck into the palace and walked up to the throne.

Someone must have alerted my father to her arrival, because he burst into the room a few moments later, flanked by guards. Ariel and Margaret were there too. Ophelia was tending the gardens at the time. She told me later how much she regretted that.

"Moya," my father hissed, "what are you doing here?"

She dragged a finger along the armrest. “Redecorating.”

“Seize her.”

The guards raced towards her, but were sent flying with a wave of her hand. Margaret and Ariel leapt in front of their charge, summoning a shield. Moya picked one of the guards off the floor with her magic, and snapped her spine. Then she went for another.

“I can keep going.”

The shield lowered.

“What do you want, Moya?” my father asked.

She reached his side. “Freedom,” she said, “and everything else my sister has.”

Ariel saw the flash of the dagger before it connected. She leapt forward, but Moya froze her and Margaret in place. Froze their bodies, at least. Their eyes were still moving, still watching everything that happened next.

She slid the dagger into my father’s side, and he crumpled to the floor.

Margaret let out a low moan.

It was over in seconds.

“Eila,” he breathed, his fingers trying in vain to staunch the blood, “Eila, I should have liked... to have seen him...”

Moya lowered a hand to his chest, and turned his heart to stone, preventing my mother from casting any of the resurrection spells she would try.

And she would try, all of them. And I would watch those too.

Just like I watched Moya leaving him, and her magic springing the fairies free, and watched them cry over his lifeless body, sobbing both for him, and my mother.

“The child,” Ariel wept at one point, still stroking back his hair, with more meaning packed into those two words than could possibly be conveyed.

Margaret’s fingers, stained with my father’s blood, clasped Ariel’s over an inert chest. “We’ll take care of him.”



I fall into sleep uneasily, haunted by the memory I never should have witnessed, but my dream is beautiful. I am swimming in the lake, in my true body. I am flesh. My skin feels like silk.

I have had this dream before, but this time I am accompanied by a beautiful intruder. Rose is in the lake too, swimming with more confidence than she has ever shown in life. I am so aware that this is a dream, but I do not care. I want to drown in it.

I glide forward and reach out to touch her. Her skin sears mine, her touch lightning. She smiles at me, warm and rapturous. My insides melt. I long to touch her again, more of her, all of her.

Suddenly, Rose's smile drops. She shakes her head, skirting backwards in the water.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"This is wrong," she says bluntly. "This isn't right."

It feels more right than anything else in my life. Does she not feel that too? "Why isn't it?"

"You aren't... you're not him."

"Who?"

"Thorn. I shouldn't... I shouldn't be dreaming of you. It isn't right."

She doesn't recognise me. The thought makes me laugh. It is a dream of mine, of course, my desire creates hers. She wants to be here with me, the face she knows. She wants me, no one else.

"Rose." I pull her towards me. She does not resist. She moulds into me, reassured by my voice. "It's all right. It's me."

She still looks sceptical. "What do you mean?"

"I'm Thorn, silly." I lean forward in the water, my hands sliding round her back. I stare at her glass-green eyes like I can reach into her soul. "Can't you see?"

Rose's eyes widen, as if she suddenly understands. She places a hand against my cheek, and I swear it hums beneath her touch. My fingers move to wipe back her hair. Before another word can be uttered between us, our mouths slide together and we are kissing.

Her breath explodes into me. Our lips sing. I feel the warmth of her spreading outwards, covering every inch of my skin. We are fire and starlight, weightless and weighty. I am soaring, and still tied to the earth, tied to her.

I want to tell her that I love her, but I do not want to stop kissing her. It doesn't seem to matter, in the dream. The words burst out of me, surrounding us both.

*I love you. Stay with me. I love you.*



The next morning, Rose seems a bit distracted. Her hair is all over the place, her cheeks red. When I ask if she's all right, she rushes her words. Her cheeks get even redder. She tries to blame it on the weather, but I sense there is something else. She tucks in her chair, and scuttles off before she's even finished her meal. I don't think I've ever seen her so flustered.

"What's wrong with her?" I ask aloud.

Ariel appears beside me. "I'm on it." She disappears just as quickly.

With nothing else to do while Rose bathes, I wander into the Hall of Mirrors, avoiding the Mirror of Truth and the Mirror of Fear. The contents of the former remain a mystery to me, and the contents of the latter... I already know, and I do not wish to see. It may come to pass, soon enough.

I have no need to look in the Mirror of Desire. It would only show me her. My desire is flesh and blood and walks beside me, a living ghost, a golden blessing. She haunts me, torments me, calms me.

Not for the first time, I wish I could write. I wish I could press my words into paper, explain them, define them, commit them. I have heard it said that until something is written, it is never truly spoken.

I fall beside the Mirror of the Past, the one I spend the most time with, watching endless memories of long ago, of happier times. But this morning, I am after something more recent, urged by the faint echo of Rose's lips against mine.

How much of it was real, what I imagined when I lay near death?

"Show me Rose trying to save me."

The mirror whirls back to my bedroom. I lie cold and still on the bed, not moving, Rose's face a stark mask of agony and she begs me to drink.

When I do not, she places her mouth on mine.

Something between cold dread and elation churns within me. I cannot believe that she did this, and that I have no clear memory of what it was like. What must it have felt like, to her, all my teeth pressed against her soft, perfect lips?

No wonder she hasn't mentioned it.

Ariel reappears before I've had much time to dwell on what I've just witnessed.

"Is Rose all right?"

"Strange dreams, I think, but she didn't tell me what they were."

"Right."

She pats down my mane. "What did you dream of?"

"I... don't remember."

"Ugh. You and Rose. You're both such liars."

I don't know what to say to this. "Rose... Rose kissed me while I was unconscious."

Ariel bobs. "If you call that a kiss, sure. To save you."

"How did it work?"

"Who knows? But it did. Maybe because you love her. True love, boy. Can defeat anything, or so they say."

Her tiny form drifts over to the Mirror of Truth, and her face fills the frame, her willowy form as supple as water. I have never looked at her this way, never really looked at her at all: there is no need to examine a face you have known all your life. But I do now. She is young, or looks it, the appearance in human years of someone only twenty; I have always seen her as old, but she looks very young to me now.

"Ariel..." I ask quietly, "have you ever loved someone?"

Ariel tilts her head slightly to the side, her movements stilling. "Yes," she replies, after a pause, "but not enough."

"Not enough for what?"

"To spend forever with."

I suspect that she means more than that, that *enough* holds other things, other things she wouldn't do for this person. She could not commit to them. She could not love them with everything. She could not break a curse for them.

"I have a question," Ariel starts.

"Do you? Because it sounds like a complaint."

“How is it that Rose could see us before you? You knew we were there. I know you were looking for us—”

“I don’t know, Ariel,” I say. “You know I wanted to see you. Longed for it. Since the day you disappeared. But I... I’d lost all hope. I thought you had become a part of the castle, like my mother. Little more alive than furniture.”

“So you thought you couldn’t see us, and so you couldn’t,” she murmurs. “And Rose is the opposite.”

“Come again?”

“Rose thought she could see us, imagined it possible, and thus she could.”

“What are you thinking, Ariel?”

“I’m wondering what her power is. All the girls had one. Grace could see the future... in her way, at least. I think Rose might be similar. I think she can see what others can’t. What they can be, or should be. Maybe even what they are.”

“That might be true,” I say, a little forlornly. “But then why hasn’t she seen me?”

“Who’s to say she hasn’t?”

*Because if she has, I wouldn’t still be this way.*

“I think she has to say it,” Ariel says, as if reading my mind. “I don’t think it’s enough to just love you, she has to announce it.”

“And what if she never says it? Because she doesn’t feel it?”

“Well, then she’s a fool. Wait, that sounded dangerously like affection. Hmm. I better insult you...”

I groan. “Why are you like this?”

She shrugs. “Because you need me to be.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’ve got Margaret to mother you and Ophelia to be your maiden aunt. You didn’t need another caretaker. You needed someone to be young and silly with you.”

“Like a sister, you mean.”

She nudges my elbow. “You know you wouldn’t have me any other way.”

Margaret and Ophelia drift in not long afterwards. They magic us some pillows and sit beside me, summoning an old story on the mirror. It’s the tale of my great-grandparents, on my father’s side. The same ones that

used to tell him fantastic stories. The fairies showed it to me long ago when I was adamant that true love wasn't a thing and I was going to remain this way forever.

It is possible their story sparked my interest in romance.

The Mirror shows a scene of the two of them walking through a forest, singing together, teasing one another. Their easiness reminds me of Rose and myself in a way that makes me smile and ache.

"Ah, Briar and Leopold," Ariel swoons. "A sweet story. Shame about what happened at the end."

I baulk. "What happened at the end?"

"She's teasing you." Margaret sighs. "They were very happy together."

"They were very *boring* together," Ariel groans. "Literally nothing happened after he rescued her. They got married and had children and reigned in almost perfect peace and prosperity for the rest of their days. Happiness is such a tragedy to the rest of us."

I blink at her, looking at the other two. "Is she all right?"

"Honestly, dear, we do worry sometimes."

"They were a lovely couple," Ophelia croons, ignoring Ariel's strange remarks. "Leo was a sweetheart."

"*Such* a sweetheart," Margaret agrees. "Not like his namesake, your father. He was wicked."

"He was hilarious!" Ariel says. "But yes, Leopold was sweet, I grant you that. You remind me of him a bit, you know. Sensitive boy. Much better at expressing his feelings than you. Only took him a few weeks."

"Different circumstances, dear."

"They were both really high stakes!"

Margaret sighs, her expression turning misty as she looks at the will-be lovers, strolling together, not quite touching.

"You were married once, weren't you, Margaret?" I say.

"Twice, actually. I was very young, the first time. It burnt out as quickly as a flame."

"How can you love someone and stop loving them?"

"If only we knew the answer to that one!" she scoffed. "Oh, the hearts we would save. I tell you this about my first love: I loved the idea of her more than I loved her. Oh, when we parted, my heart shattered truly enough, but as I picked up those pieces I saw her, and myself, for who we really were. I had painted a picture based on falsehoods, through a lens.

My second love, well... it was not as bright or passionate as the first, but earth is stronger than fire. It endures when the flames die out. We were wonderfully, blissfully comfortable together for almost a hundred years."

"He died."

"Yes," she replied stonily. "Moya. One of her earliest attacks."

"You have a daughter. I never asked... what happened to her?"

"She left the palace, when the Queen opened the gateway, one last time. She did not want to leave, but she had two young children of her own."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I have hope I will see her again one day."

Many hundreds of years have happened outside our realm. Fairies may live a very long time, but Margaret must know there is a good chance her daughters and grandchildren have grown and died. What she gave up to serve my mother... to look after me. I love her for it and resent her for it at the same time. I am not worthy. This was not worth it.

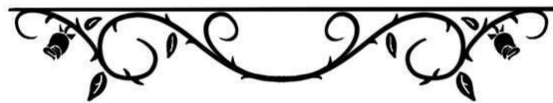
"Are you all right, dearheart?" Margaret asks, creeping closer.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just fine."





## ROSE



The following morning, I gather my courage and go to check on my family again before Thorn wakes up. Nothing out of the ordinary appears to be happening with them. Nothing out of the ordinary ever really happens back home. Only my glance at Freedom unsettles me; he is walking in the woods again. Did he tell the others that he saw me there? Does he think he imagined the whole thing? Is he all right? His expression offers no clue. We are alike in that way, I think. Both of us can be hard to read unless we're furious.

I turn to the Mirror of Memories to show me the moment the garden started to bloom again. It shows me the first snowdrop emerging from the patch where I planted mine. I am nowhere to be seen.

"Show me what I was doing, at the same time."

I am in the library with Thorn, turning a page. Neither one of us is doing anything remarkable. My eyes are rooted on my book, and Thorn is...

Well, Thorn keeps glancing at me, actually.

I try to convince myself that the book just isn't that interesting, but I know I am fooling myself. I think the garden started to bloom when he started to like me.

My eyes drift to the Mirror of Desire. I wonder if it would show me Thorn's, if I asked it. I wonder if my own would mirror his. Do I really want to open that door?

Next to it, the Mirror of Fear glistens. A part of me is less afraid of whatever this would reveal. I step in front of it once more.

I see my parents' bedroom. Papa is lying on the bed. He's older, his face chalky and etched with deep lines. His breathing is painful, raspy.

My stomach churns. I know it's just a vision, that it isn't real, but it is still difficult to witness. Freedom, Honour, Hope and Beau all crowd around him. There are other people too, younger. Faces I don't recognise. Their children?

"Rose," Papa calls out, his voice rough as bracken, "where did you go?"

This fear is hardly surprising. My family growing old without me. My father dying, never knowing what became of me. But this fear does not have to come to pass.

"Rose!"

The image swirls. This second vision is so much worse. Thorn is lying in the rose garden, our place, bleeding. The blood spreads across the stones like water gushing over a riverbed. Unstoppable. He is calling my name, and I am not there. *I am not there.*

The unutterable reality of Thorn's death. The one death I could not bear. I came so close to it before, and I know now that I could never watch him die. My soul could not survive it. But... but it could still happen, and, unlike my father dying without ever having seen me again, I will be powerless to stop it. The way he called my name cuts into me... like he knew I was never coming. The desperation in his voice was palpable.

"Rose..."

Another voice calls my name. I wheel around. The fairies are hovering in front of the Mirror of Truth. Eager to wipe the fears from my mind, I scurry over. Inside the mirror are three distinct figures. At the front is Ariel, more solid than she has ever been before, although she moves slowly, as if captured on a series of fast-moving portraits. To the left of her is a small, slight, pale-faced girl, with short, light green hair and eyes like chipped aquamarine. She is half the size of the other two, a child in stature. For a second, I think she is wearing a glittering cape made out of shimmering gossamer, but then the cape wiggles. Not a cape—wings.

The other figure belongs to a stately woman. Of the three of them, she looks the most human, with her long, straight nose, proud neck, and brown hair piled on top of her head. But her eyes are cool and golden, caught somewhere between a cat's and an owl's.

At this stage, I know it shouldn't surprise me, but I cannot help but gape in wonder at the three fairies in the mirror before me.

Ariel's lovely face breaks into a wide smile. "Hello!"

"Hurrah!" exclaims the little girl. "You can see us!"

Ariel gives her a playful nudge. "Rose, I think it's time I introduced you officially to Margaret and Ophelia."

"I was thinking the exact same thing. I should have insisted days ago, but—"

"You were occupied," says Margaret pointedly. "We saw."

A blush rises to my cheeks.

"Anyway, this is Ophelia," Ariel says, gesturing to the little green girl. "She minds the gardens, mostly. We get around a lot nowadays. And this —" she turns towards the stately woman—"is Margaret. You can blame her for all the dresses."

"Oh, er..." I stifle an awkward blush. I had taken apart most of the dresses I'd been given, not giving a thought to the one who made them.

Margaret sniffs. "I assure you, they were the height of fashion at one point," she says stiffly. "Your mother loved them. But not to worry. I will find something perfect for you in time."

"I loved the nightwear."

"Those were Ariel's."

"Oh, um, so—"

"Anyway," Ariel intervenes, "I thought you would like to meet the rest of the team. What's left of us."

"Is it just you? All three of you, for this entire castle?"

"I know," Margaret says proudly, "we do a good job, do we not?"

"What happened to the others? I've heard the stories, of course. The war between light and dark, the queen dismissing her subjects, but... I feel like I'm missing something. Who is this dark fairy? What does she want? What can I do?"

The fairies sigh, casting furtive glances between them, as if they are discussing something telepathically. Ophelia tugs on the corner of Ariel's sleeve. She leans up and whispers something in her ear. Ariel turns to Margaret, and all three of them hang there for a moment, conversing silently.

It is Margaret who responds. "We will show you, Rose," she says reluctantly. "Or show you what we can. It is not a short story, however.

You may wish to sit down.”

“Show me? What do you—”

Before anyone can answer, the Mirror of Memories bursts into life. Images and figures literally pour out of the frame, sunlight floods the room, birdsong crawls into the air. I have never seen it do this before, but then, I am not one of the Fey. The mirror’s magic collides with that of the fairies’ in beautiful and discordant harmony.

The meadow blossoms before me. Two dark-haired young girls are skipping about in it, little golden wings trailing behind them. They are so similar they could almost be twins, although the younger one has the smallest, sweetest set of horns protruding out of the top of her hair. A flower is tied to one of them.

“Eila! Wait for me!” she calls out to the older one.

Her sister stops and grins, holding out her hand for her to follow. I miss Honour and Hope with a sudden pang.

“Come on!” Eila calls.

The two run on, hand-in-hand, until they reach a river bank. My riverbank. They slow to a crawl, creeping through the long grass, spying on a group of very ordinary human children splashing around in the stream. They are dressed in loose, old-fashioned clothing.

“Boo!” Eila leaps out at them. I expect them to startle at the sight of a fairy child appearing out of nowhere, but they don’t. Instead, they laugh joyously and start splashing them too.

The game continues for some time, until there is a sudden cry. Eila spins round, and her sister is standing over one of the human boys, who is clutching his cheek. His eyes well up.

“Monster!” he yells, and then he and the other boys turn on their heels and run.

“Moya!” Eila calls, racing to her side. “Why did you do that?”

“He pulled my horns and asked me if I was a goat,” Moya snuffles. “I’m not a goat!”

“Of course you aren’t,” Eila replies, “and I love your horns. But you shouldn’t have slapped him. You know what humans are like.”

“Stupid.”

“No, scared. I know a lot of the grown-up ones are frightened of us.”

“Why would they be frightened of us?”

“Because,” Eila responds, “we are not like them.”

The scene changes, morphing into the ballroom. A ball is in progress, and the guests are as colourful as the surroundings. The entire fairy court must be present, plus many of their human neighbours. The sisters are adults now. Eila is dressed in soft yellow, and her golden wings float down her back like a cape. She reminds me of sunlight on a cloudy day; all of the beauty with none of the harshness. The differences between the two sisters have become more pronounced over the years, and Moya is now the moonlight to her sister's sun. Her horns are larger, and her wings more silver than gold.

By the table, two human adolescents are staring at the older sister. "Isn't she beautiful?" one gapes.

"For sure, but I've heard she can turn men to stone just by looking at them."

"I heard that was the younger one."

"Oh, that makes sense, she looks the part after all." He mimes the curve of her horns with his fingers and the two of them snigger.

"Shall we test the theory?" Moya materialises behind them. They stumble back into the table, upsetting the punch bowl. "Careful, boys," she sneers. "Did you not hear? If you touch the food of the fairies', you will have to stay with us forever. Wouldn't want you to have to put up with me all of that time."

One of the boys is trembling, but the other gathers some courage. "Witch," he spits.

Moya puts on a face of delight, but it is not hard to see the hurt in her eyes. "I could be," she hisses.

Another day, another scene. Moya is walking through a market, simple and ordinary. She stops to coo at a baby. The baby giggles, but the mother whirls around and snatches it away. "Get away from my baby, fiend!" she curses. "I've heard what your kind do to them."

A grand announcement, a royal procession. "*All hail Queen Eilinora!*"

Moya is in the Hall of Mirrors, what could be years or decades later, it is unclear. The sisters appear to have stopped ageing. There are some differences in Moya's face, however. Her features are sharper, her skin sallow. Eila stands behind her, taller and grander and more beautiful than ever, a crown woven into her shining hair.

"Your Majesty," Moya mock-curtsies.

"To you, I will always be Eila."

“If you say so,” Moya turns back to face her reflection, her mouth turned up in a look of utter disdain. “Tell me, dear sister, what is it that you see when you look in the Mirror of Truth? You probably look even more beautiful than you do now, don’t you?”

“You and I look virtually the same, dearest—”

“We used to,” Moya says bitterly. “Do you know what I see now?”

“No.”

“I see a monster.”

Snippets of stories spanning decades. Reports to Eilinora: “Your sister appears to be inciting violence against humans...” “There’s been a rumour of...” “A fairy has been accused of stealing a child...”

Eilinora’s face grows tired and weary. She speaks to Moya. “I just want to know why they might be saying these things, dearest.”

“Why do you think?” her sister screams. “Because I look like a monster, that’s why!”

“But you aren’t!”

“Well, maybe I want to be!”

“You... you don’t mean that.”

“Why not? If the crown fits...” Her eyes fall to Eila’s. “Not all crowns are made of silver and gold.”

The Queen meets Leo down by the lake. Their entire courtship plays out at lightning speed, hazy portraits of an endless summer, of days brushed by gold and sunrise.

“When do you think you’ll tire of this pet of yours?” Moya asks.

Her sister grimaces at the use of the word, *‘pet’*. “Actually, I think I’m going to marry him.”

“Marry him? But—he’s a *human*!”

“I know, which is why I think I must seize the precious time we have together. Mortal lives are so short, after all.”

“But they hate us!”

“Leo doesn’t.”

“You wait,” Moya spits. “He’ll never be happy as your husband.”

But they look wondrously, blissfully happy. Even though, in the scenes that follow, there are slight signs of Leo ageing. His form broadens, silver touches his hair, the lines of laughter linger on his face.

Eilinora remains untouched by the years, as smooth and perfect as a pearl.

Then there is the day I've seen before: when the Queen closes the way to the mortal realm, where Moya fights her for the first time. Now I see her coming back, dozens of supporters behind her. They look like they used to be fairies, but now their skin is tarnished with grey, their eyes dark.

Moya's wings have turned the colour of pitch-black night. "Open the way again, Eilinora."

"You know I will not. We are meant to be allies. If we cannot be that, then it is better that we live apart for now."

"We were meant to rule them. And if you won't, I will."

"Do not start this fight, sister. It is not one you can win."

Moya's face twists into a horrible smile, and for the first time, she is fully recognisable as the face in the lake. "Who said anything about winning?"

A series of battles unfold in the room. Lightning pervades the air. The castle is mutated into a war ground; bodies pile along the corridors. Leo vanishes from the pictures; I do not see him fall. The next stark image is Moya bound in chains, being held in the Hall of Mirrors.

*"What have you done to him?"* Eilinora screams.

Moya just smiles, and the smile splits the scene. Only fragments of what follows are visible: Moya being dragged towards a mirror of liquid silver, shrieking with a strange, desperate delight. "I will be free one day, and you... you will have lost everything!"

Eilinora watches as her sister disappears, and a black cloth is fastened around the frame. "I already have."

The next image is quieter, but by no means calmer. There is a defeated, tired quality to the entire room, as if the walls themselves are slouched. Eilinora sits by the remains of her throne, staring up at the scorched portrait.

"Your Majesty," Margaret approaches her, flanked by Ariel and Ophelia. "I beg you to reconsider. There must be another way—"

"This is the only way." She sighs. "Moya is too strong to be contained forever. I must enter her prison too. I will fight her from within, and keep this place alive for as long as I can."

"This could kill you."

"It probably will." Her eyes mist over. "Please... take care of him."

She vanishes in an eruption of light.



It is long past morning when the mirrors finally go quiet.

“They were sisters,” I say eventually, turning back to the fairies. “They were sisters, and she...”

“We were there, Rose. We saw,” Margaret responds. “I was present for all of it. They are my memories too. Three hundred years of it.”

Three hundred years. A long time for dark thoughts to fester, for Moya to turn from the child to the monster. Could I ever grow to hate Honour or Hope in the way Moya hated Eilinora?

Not in a thousand years, Not in a million. I could never want anything of theirs so much.

“I still... I still don’t know what the curse really is,” I say numbly. “And where was Thorn in all of this?”

The fairies fall silent.

“Alas, dear, if we tell you, we may lose all hope of the curse ever being undone,” Margaret explains, not fully meeting my gaze. “We have made that mistake before.”

“What do you mean?”

“One or two of the other girls figured it out, or were told,” Ariel explains. “As you can see, it didn’t help.”

“But how do you know that I’m the same—”

“You’re not the same,” says Margaret tartly. “Which is why we cannot take any risks.”

I resist the urge to stamp my foot, glaring instead. “This is... immensely frustrating, you know.”

All three of the fairies sigh in unison. “No need to tell us, dear,” Margaret titters. “We’ve been watching girls fail for a decade now.”

“Is there a reason we’ve all been girls?”

“Yes,” says Ariel. The other two fairies glare at her, as if she’s given too much away. “Well, there is.”

My eyes drift towards the blackened mirror. It seems to rumble, thundering quietly. If the others notice it, they say nothing. “What would I



see if I tore down the cover?”

“With any luck, you would see nothing.”

“What else could I see?”

“At worst?” says Ariel. “Her face, staring back at you.”

An icicle shoots through me. “But... she’s not contained to the mirror,” I continue. “I’ve seen her face before. In the darkness, in other reflections...”

All three of the fairies shudder inwardly. “We know,” they say. “We were there, too.”

“How can she do that?”

“Trickery, magic,” Ariel says. “I told you before, that she was hoarding it. Waiting for a chance to break free, originally. Now waiting for the chance to hurt you.”

She had tricked me into falling through the ice, and then terrified me into going out after Thorn, putting myself in danger. The storm had to be the worst of it. Are her powers growing? I share my thoughts with the fairies.

“I imagine, after an attack like that, she needs some time to recover,” Margaret surmises. “But we shall have to take precautions during the next full moon. If you haven’t managed to break the curse by then, of course.”

I swallow. *No pressure, Rose.*

“It has to be you now,” says Margaret sternly. “And if you fail... all will be lost forever.”



I ask the fairies to give me some time alone, to process what I have just seen. In reality, I am sick of them: sick of the well-meaning lies and the frustration they bring. I need to see something good. Checking in on my family is out of the question, so I step back towards the Mirror of Memories instead.

“Show me a moment in Thorn’s childhood, when he was happy.”

I am certain he will not mind me seeing this, that it will not show me anything I should not see. But I am desperate to know his story, whatever

pieces I can.

The library flickers into view. Thorn is there, a mere sniff of the size he is now. He is so tiny. How old can he possibly be? His back is pressed up against a wall, an oversized book open on his lap. He's reading aloud.

*"Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived a beautiful girl in a quiet village..."* He stops, grappling at the corner. "I can't turn the pages."

"You'll learn, little one." A voice sounds from somewhere, but I cannot see its owner. It is a lovely voice. Soft and deep, but also... sad. She sounds like she's in pain. Thorn, I think, is too little to pick up on this. "Try again. Be gentle. Take your time."

Thorn struggles, screwing up his face, trying to force his nail under the paper. "I did it!" he exclaims eventually.

"I knew you would, dearheart," the voice says proudly. "You can do anything you wish, if you try hard enough, for long enough. Remember that. Whatever happens. And remember... you are never alone. Never, ever, ever." The voice trickles away.

"Mother?" says Thorn. *"Mother!"*

The mirror swirls back to normal, and I know why. That memory is no longer a happy one. I ask for other moments. I see him playing out in the gardens with Ariel and Ophelia, back when they had forms. Margaret is laying out a picnic. Thorn dashes into the lake and comes out with a fish in his mouth. Ariel and Ophelia both fall apart laughing whilst Margaret sighs. Once the fish is liberated, she wrestles him into her arms and begins to dry him off furiously.

"How will you ever find yourself a wife if you don't behave at least a *little* bit like a gentleman?"

Thorn scowls. "I don't want a wife. I like being me!"

As if to prove his point, he leaps away from her and bounds back into the lake, knocking her off her feet, which makes him laugh even harder.

"You can still be you with a wife!" she yells.

At one point, he was happy being him. When did this change? When the others came, from outside? When people screamed at him? When the fairies faded, and he became alone in the world? At what point did he look in the mirror and decide he was a monster?

This, I think, is too personal to ask.

"Show me another happy moment."

There are a few moments of joy with the other visitors of the castle. Only a handful. Six visitors before me, and only a handful of pleasant memories.

There are more moments with the fairies, but they soon trickle out. Soon, they appear only as talking sprites, then little lights, then... nothing. Thorn grows older without them. The happy moments I am shown now are limited to him buried inside a book. A feeling I know well. That's how I first eked out happiness after Mama died.

I startle when Mama appears in Thorn's memories. The two of them are eating dinner, laughing pleasantly. Mama sings a song on the harp. He nods along. He hands her flowers that she sews onto a dress... her wedding dress.

I was sure, from the way he spoke about her, that there were more happy memories than this, but there's only a few in so many months.

"Another happy memory, please."

White bursts across the glass. I remember this scene well; the first day we played in the snow. The mirror settles on our snowman. It's so strange, watching myself from afar, watching Thorn watching me. His eyes follow wherever I go.

The mirror shows me giving Thorn his birthday present. His face is so much more beautiful than it was when I experienced this scene firsthand. It melts when I put it around his neck. His voice is barely a whisper when he thanks me.

Thorn and I dancing. Thorn helping me in the garden. The two of us reading together. Me bandaging Thorn's arm. How can this be a happy memory? Then I see the way he looks down at the bandages after I am done and touches what I touched. Is it because I wasn't afraid of him, or because I helped him? Because he knew I cared?

Teaching me how to climb a tree. Falling on top of him. Singing in the music room. Us in the rose garden. Us by the lake, me snuggled in his arms during the thunderstorm.

There are so many memories of me. Are these truly the only happy memories he has? Is the rest of his life so clearly eclipsed by his time with me? I do not feel surprised, but I do feel something. Honoured, strange, sympathetic, awful, glowing.

"Rose?"

I startle at his presence, so far wrapped up in our memories. Thankfully, the mirror has returned to normal.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I say, quickly dabbing at my hot, damp cheeks. “Come and sit beside me.”

“What are we looking at?”

I turn back towards the mirror. “Show us *my* happiest memories.”



I sit beside Rose so close that our shoulders are almost touching, but it's her words that really touch me. There's something in the way she says *my* that speaks of something, but before I can ponder on it, a memory from Rose's childhood flashes before me. Grace, tucking up her children in bed, reading to them. More images flood the screen: her playing with them, walking through the woods singing to them and telling them stories of long, long ago.

There're memories without Grace, too. Memories of Rose chasing her older brother around the garden with a toy sword, pelting him with wads of mud. Memories of her and her siblings running through the meadow, weaving the long grass into tents, splashing in the stream, squealing with delight.

I watch as Rose tries to teach her younger sister how to read, as she builds snowmen with her family in the fields, and comes back home to snuggle down beside the fire, resting her head against Grace's large belly.

The next memory isn't for a long time afterward, when a chubby baby takes his first step. Freedom gathers him up in his arms, grinning from ear to ear.

"I proclaim you the greatest baby and the best of all brothers!"

The siblings fall into a pile together.

There are more wonderful moments after that, although they feel fewer and far between. Beautiful days spent in the woods, or singing around a

piano. So many spent teaching Beau how to do things.

I am conscious that the mirror doesn't seem to include any moment of her with this boy she kissed. If he is there—in the back of some party scene, perhaps—neither Rose nor I notices him.

White bursts across the glass, and for a moment, I think we've flicked to one of my memories; it's the first day we played in the snow. I am watching myself watching Rose.

The mirror shows our birthday, the exchange of presents, the glow in my eyes when she touches me. Can she not see how much I adore her, even back then?

The two of us dancing. Gardening together. Reading together. Fishing. Being. Teaching Rose how to climb a tree. Her falling on top of me. Singing in the music room. Us in the rose garden. Us by the lake, Rose snuggled in my arms during the thunderstorm.

So many happy memories with me.

I say nothing until the montage of her life is over, and when I do speak, all I can manage is, "Thank you."

It is real, true, veritable proof of her affection for me, however minor it might be. And she shared it with me.

We sit for a long while in silence, barely touching.

"Why did you show those to me?" I ask finally.

"I needed something good after..." Her expression glazes with darkness. "The fairies showed me what happened here. Between the fairy queen and... and her sister."

"Oh."

"I can't ever imagine hating Hope or Honour like that. Not even Freedom. I don't want to imagine it." She shivers, and I offer her my arm. She buries herself into it. "I... I asked the mirrors to show me your happiest memories first. I hope you don't mind. You said that the mirrors wouldn't show me anything that—"

"I don't mind," I tell her. "But... why mine?"

Rose looks down. "I wanted to know you a little better," she admits. "Silly, isn't it? I feel like I already know all the important parts of you. But... well. There it is. It seemed only right that I show you my own afterwards."

"I see."

Rose sighs. "So few happy memories, Thorn."

Somehow, my hand finds its way to hers. "It's all right," I tell her. "You're here now."



For days afterwards, I wonder if that was a cruel thing for me to say, if it placed too much pressure on her to stay out of some sense of obligation, some suggestion that I couldn't be happy without her. But at the time, I truly meant it. I would endure everything twice over just to know her.

Just to know her. Nothing more.

Love is a foolish thing.

We settle on a new date for our ball: three week's time, a few days after the next full moon. I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried about what Moya might have in store for her this time, but the fairies assure me that an attack of that magnitude was likely to have depleted her.

"She was desperate," Margaret concludes.

"Why?" I wonder.

"I imagine she suspected the curse was close to being broken."

I swallow nervously, imagining what might have given her that impression, especially as Rose was to leave a few days later. Maybe she knew I was going to confess, and didn't want to give any opportunity of my suit being returned. She can't know Rose's heart any more than I do, but I've made my own transparently clear.

Well, at least to the fairies. I doubt Rose doesn't know by now, at least by some measure, but still...

*Tell her, tell her, tell her.*

The ball is a welcome distraction, both for ourselves, and our fairy companions, who absolutely forbid us from helping in any way, shape or form. I take Rose back to the lake and we continue our climbing and swimming lessons. Inspired by our previous success, I decide to take up painting, gifting Rose with each of my endeavours although I'm fairly sure she's accepting them out of politeness.

"I'm running out of space!" she declares eventually. "May I suggest you turn your attention to calligraphy?"

I prickle at the thought of this, aware of how painfully clumsy my handwriting is, how long it takes me to craft anything like a sentence. But Rose could ask me to fly and I'd probably attempt the task.

My resolve melts after a few nights of practising my letters and still having little more than a few, untidy scrawls to show for it. Nothing looks like I want it to. One evening, I pick up my paper, crush it into as much of a ball shape as I can manage, and hurl it towards the fireplace. It falls a little short.

"This is hopeless!" I cry.

Rose hurries over, pulling the ink bottle out of reach. "You're doing fine."

"I'm not, Rose!" I thump my hands against the table. "These ridiculous paws—nobody can write with them!"

Rose takes my hand and imprisons it in hers. She holds it there until I look at her, sensing she will not move until I do. That's reason enough to stay still. "I love these hands," she says, and her words reach me more softly than her touch, every syllable a caress she cannot mean. "They are by far the most gentle that I have ever held."

Everything in me softens, and I want to beg her to speak again, not caring if they're lies sent to soothe me. Give me more lies, beautiful goddess.

I stare at her, not sure what to say. Her mouth wobbles as if she's struggling to speak.

*Speak, speak, please. I'd sell my soul for a syllable.*

"Thorn," Rose continues, her voice tight, "when the gate opens, and I go home again... would you come with me?"

The breath stills in my throat. What does she mean by asking me this? No one has ever, ever asked me this. It's ludicrous. Absurd. She can't mean it.

Then why ask?

It may be the first time I have ever refused her. "No, Rose, I cannot." I tear my hand away from her, the loss of it aching. I cannot look at her face. I get up, moving closer to the window.

"But why not?" Her voice sounds pained.

"Well, I admit I know little of the outside world, but I am sure I am right in guessing that it knows little of magic, and thus might be a little hard to explain... me." I gesture to my body.



"I wouldn't mind explaining," she says gently.

"I would," I respond, almost as quietly. "That's even if I lived long enough for you to begin explaining."

"Don't talk like that."

"You know it's the truth. The outside world is not a place for me. They would kill me or put me in a cage... one much smaller than this."

A coldness settles in the air between us. I can feel Rose staring at me still. I think, for the first time, I want her to leave. I don't know what to say to her.

*I would come with you if I could. I would follow you anywhere, but there is only death there.*

*Unless you release me. Release me. Please. Only you can.*

But she won't. Or she can't.

"I... I'm not sure, if I go back, and I never see you again," Rose continues, "that I will ever be... truly happy again."

For some reason, her words don't soften me. I manage a hard snort. *But you don't feel like I feel. You never have. I don't think you ever will.* "A touch dramatic, I fear."

"Will you be happy, without me?"

*Of course not. I barely knew the meaning of the word until I knew you.*

"No," I say, "but that is because I will be alone. You shall have your family to distract you from any immediate loneliness, and I've no doubt, after some time, you shall move on from this experience."

Now it is Rose's turn to laugh. "Move on? How can you think such a thing?"

"All the others did."

"Well, I'm not all the others, am I?"

"No," I say sadly, "you certainly aren't."

*I almost wish you were, so you could not hurt me this way.*

"Why am I so different?"

*Because I love you.*

Does she honestly not know? It takes me an age to speak, to find something that isn't a lie but isn't so much the truth that the next words she utters could destroy me. "You always treated me like a person," I tell her, "and then, very quickly, like a friend."

Rose frowns, as if she knows I'm not being entirely honest. "My mother did the same," she says, "and you said one or two others you might have

called friends. I am more than a friend, whatever we are. Why?"

I feel like my own silence is deafening. "I do not know," I manage. "I wish I did. Perhaps then, it might be easier to explain while I shall not move on, but expect you will. I never... I never knew what it was like, to truly be myself with another person, until I knew you, and your soul slipped so easily into mine that I so quickly forgot what life without you was like. If only it were so easily expressed, if I could squeeze it into numbers rather than words. If it were logical, rather than akin to madness. You are more than a friend. You are more myself than I am."

Without saying the words, I cannot find a better way to confess them. I wait for her to understand, to say something, anything back. To crush me, to express some thin sliver of the same sentiment.

She does neither.

"I'm going to come back," she tells him, "on the next solstice."

I exhale deeply. Damn this woman. "It won't be enough, Rose."

"Enough for what?"

"Either of us. I don't think I could bear to see you only for a few hours every year. The rest of my existence would be suspended, waiting for those few moments. I would be like an unfurled flower, all year long, waiting for those few moments in the sunlight with you. I don't... I don't presume to imagine your feelings, but... you will have a life outside of this place, a life that shouldn't be held back by a promise you made to me, when you were lonely and had no one else."

I cannot read Rose's expression. I cannot chip away at the adamant of her mind.

But I have nothing else to say.

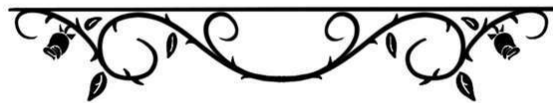
Rose moves towards the door, her fingers clasping around the handle. I wait for her to slip away without another word.

If she says 'goodbye' it will feel like forever.

But she does not say that. Once more surprising me, once more holding me above the pit of despair on a thin string of hope, she says, "I was always lonely, until I met you."



## ROSE



Anything that passed between us last night is ignored when dawn comes around, as has become our fashion. So many times we toe the line of that vast ocean, only to hear storm clouds rolling in, and scuttle back to relative safety. Even on the clear days, neither of us will dive into those waters. Neither one trusts that we'll be able to return.

We fall back into our routine and pretend the question I asked was never uttered, and Thorn never told me that his life would be spent waiting for just a few brief moments with me. The weight of both is shouldered, shelved, or ignored.

One day those shelves will break beneath the weight of unuttered words, but not today. Not right now.

A few days later, I'm walking down to breakfast when I hear Thorn talking to Ariel. Neither has noticed me, and for reasons I cannot explain, I find myself slowing and coming to a stop. Perhaps I don't want them to think I am eavesdropping, or perhaps it is precisely the opposite.

"You two are killing me," Ariel buzzes.

"Not as much as it will kill me, I'm sure."

There is a long pause between the two of them. "I'm sorry," says Ariel, unusually seriously. "I didn't mean—"

"I know, Ariel."

"Can you feel it? Your heart?"

"No. Yes. Sometimes."

"I don't think she's as fey as some of the others, you know. She doesn't seem to feel her heart at all."

"She was fey enough to bring the castle back to life."

Ariel pauses.

"Ariel?"

"I think," she says gingerly, "that we might have to accept the possibility that it may not have been her, not completely."

"What do you mean?"

"You are fey as well."

Thorn exhales. "You think it might not be her at all."

"I am certain that she cares for you."

"But not enough."

Not enough? *Not enough?* The word 'care' barely scratches the surface of how I feel for Thorn—but what does that have to do with the castle? I chew on this thought for a while before I remember Thorn's other words: *she was fey enough to bring the castle back to life.*

Part-fey. I don't have any powers that I am aware of, but that might explain the dreams, and maybe it does explain the castle coming back to life. It might explain why I saw the gateway in the first place. Thorn had theorised as much before, that I'm descendant of one of the fairies who escaped from the war. It makes sense, but I fail to see what difference it makes, especially if, like Ariel suspects, it might not be me bringing life back to the castle at all. It might be Thorn, who is clearly completely fey.

I try to put it out of mind, ashamed of my eavesdropping, and of the pain in Thorn's voice when questioned about my affections.

I head along to the parlour. Bramble is already there, waiting under my chair for any scraps, even though he is far too large to manage to get more than a nose under it now. I lean down to kiss him, guilt dancing about my insides.

Thorn enters the room almost immediately after. His voice is unusually bright; I think he is trying to hide what has just transpired. "Little creature gets more kisses than I do," he moans, sitting down on the chaise.

"Don't grumble," I say, equally cheerfully. "You sound like my father."

"I am quite sure I do not wish to sound like your father. I am equally sure I would wish for a few more of your kisses."

I throw a nearby pillow at him, and he throws it back, so I seize it, sit on his lap, and hit him with it again. Then I relax my hands a little, kiss his

forehead, then both cheeks, and stop. The pillow slides from my grip. I look at Thorn's eyes, and the patches of his face I've kissed seem to stick out, shining, a triangle of kisses that should be a diamond.

I am unfinished.

I slide my fingers onto his lips and I kiss his nose with my own.

I care *enough*.



That night, I turn and twist in the darkness, and think of Thorn's lips. What would they feel like, pressed against my own? Should felt and fang touch flesh? I only see Thorn in his face, I only hold Thorn in my arms—will I feel Thorn in his kiss? Would I attempt to cross that bridge, and risk getting stranded in the centre, unable to cross? Unable to go back?

Thorn has wormed his way into my thoughts, inflicting himself on every passing moment. Even my dreams offer no escape. He is there, always, his presence heavy. His face taunts me, and his voice rumbles my soul like thunder.

I have another dream of phantom kisses, another tantalising fantasy of sunbeams and fire, deep inside me. It rouses me from my slumber, and sleeping again would be pointless. I tiptoe along to the chamber of mirrors, bringing a pillow and a blanket with me. I will not move until I am completely exhausted.

“Show me the moment my mother and father met.”

My mother and father grew up in the same village. They first passed each other in the marketplace. My mother was in a pram, my father a scrawny ten-year-old with no interest in babies. He rolled his eyes when his mother stopped to coo at her.

“Show me the moment when they first noticed each other.”

Time moves forward. My father is playing with his friends in the woods, and they come across Mama having a tea party with her friends. One of my father's group decides to throw a snail at them, and pretty soon, all the other boys are joining in, pelting the beautiful tea party with sticks and

slugs and anything then can get their hands on. Even Papa joins in, although he looks guilty about it.

The other girls burst into tears, and the boys laugh and start to run away. My mother, who can only be about six at the time, runs after them. She picks up a pebble and throws it at them. It hits my father squarely in the jaw. I have never seen my mother angry, and by the looks of things, neither has he.

He stops, startled, rubbing the side of his jaw, while she yells at him.

“Show me the first time they liked each other.”

It is at a village fête, some ten years later. Mama is dancing with her friends. A lot of boys are looking at her now, including Papa, who is now a man. Mama’s eyes, however, keep looking back at a young girl sitting by herself on a bench. Her loneliness is palpable, as is Mama’s desire to help her. She carefully breaks away from the rest of her friends, but before she reaches her side, Papa is there, asking the girl to dance. She is so happy.

That night, my parents dance together for the first time.

“Show me when they fell in love.”

The screen flickers, as though searching through a great deal of memories. It gives me nothing. It takes me a while to realise why; there is no moment, not one. Falling in love is a collection of moments.

“Show me the moment when my mother knew that she loved him.”

The mirror shows her to me in what must have been her old bedroom. She is reading a collection of fairy tales in a little seat much like the one I have, back home. All of a sudden, she puts down her book, and her eyes gaze towards the window. That’s it, that’s all. There’s no fireworks, no flash of lightning, not so much as a sigh. She just knows.

“Show me when he asked her to marry him.”

They are walking through the woods. My father is speaking, though I cannot hear the words. He’s twitchy with nerves, his eyes serious, his mouth thin. All of a sudden, my mother puts out her hand and stops him in his tracks, nodding fervently. Then, she puts her arms around his head, lifts herself up, and kisses him. The gesture catches him so off-guard that they both fall into a nearby bush and emerge a few moments later, covered in leaves and laughing giddily.

I could waste hours in front of this mirror, asking for a lifetime of moments. Mama telling him she was expecting Freedom, was expecting each one of us. The look in their eyes when they held us for the first time.

I could ask to see the dozens of family picnics, winter parties and birthdays. But those memories are already mine.

I have seen all I need to of their past.



I am in a curious mood the next day, lighter than I have been in a while. There is little to be done in the garden, so I spend most of my day in the music room, playing old romantic ballads that seem to make sense in a way I didn't fully grasp before. I tell Thorn what I saw come evening.

"I didn't realise they didn't like each other at first," I admit. "Papa was so besotted with Mama, it seemed inconceivable to imagine it hadn't always been that way."

"And your mother," asks Thorn, "was she besotted with your father?"

"Yes," I say slowly, "but not quite in the same way. You could see the devotion pouring out of Papa in every glance he gave her. Mama was more subtle in her affections towards him. She showed her affections in what she did, not what she said. No wonder he looked so nervous when he proposed!" I smile fondly at this remembrance, then a thought occurs to me. "Have you ever looked at your parents' lives?"

Thorn nods.

"What were they like?"

"Oh, utterly besotted. It quite poured out of them as well."

I wonder what Thorn's parents looked like, if he would show them to me if I asked, but his past always seems to be a sad memory for him. Whatever happened to them, their early deaths, clearly weigh heavily on his shoulders still.

"Do you miss them?" I ask.

Thorn contemplates this for a long while. "It is difficult to miss a person you never met," he says eventually. "But yes, I do. I cannot hope but imagine what my father was like, what we would have been like, how different my life might have been if he had lived. My mother... yes, I miss her. I feel her presence, and her absence, almost every day."

I nod, because I know this feeling all too well. “I felt Mama’s absence so keenly for so long,” I tell him. “I was so angry that she wasn’t here with us. I was angry at the rest of my family when they looked happy without her. That feeling faded, in time. I was less angry when people started talking about her again. It was like she was still there.”

Then I look at Thorn guiltily, because he has no one who remembers his mother, except—

“Do the fairies remember your parents?”

Thorn smiles. “Yes,” he says, “and I must admit, it is good to have someone who knows them, back in my life.”

“I should like to know them,” I say.

“And I should like to show them to you, one day.”

“But not yet?”

“No, not yet, Rose. Someday, I hope.”

I wish to know why that day cannot come sooner, for I am sure in my heart that he trusts me, but perhaps this is a matter of privacy. There are things about me that I have not shared, do not wish to... not because I do not trust him, but because I do not want them spoken. How can I expect him to share everything with me when I will not return in kind?

Although a strange thought occurs to me: if Thorn was a creation of Moya’s, how does he have parents? Parents that could love, could be remembered fondly by the fairies? What is it that I’m missing—that everyone is keeping from me?

I have wondered time and time again if Thorn was secretly Leo Valerdene, made into another shape by Moya’s magic. It’s a belief that comes purely from the dream I had in which the two of them were muddled up... and the faint remembrance of Thorn’s reflection in the Mirror of Truth. But this didn’t marry up with the knowledge that he had always been this way, and I’d also seen his memories of growing up as a child in his sweet little beastly body.

Later that night, I speak with Ariel as she runs me a bath. “Ariel, do you think that Thorn trusts me?”

Ariel pauses for a moment, and I realise this isn’t as straightforward a question as I thought. “With all but one thing,” she says eventually. She stresses the “*all*” but all I hear is that there’s one thing he doesn’t trust me with.

“And what thing is that?”



“The thing that matters most. The thing you have yet to trust him with, either.”

For some reason, this irks me. “I trust him with everything.”

Ariel sighs. “You really think that, don’t you?”

I think that I do, but I stuff the thought down, hoping to quash it out.



The days creep closer together. Five more till the full moon.

Thorn and I are sitting in the library. Bramble is at my feet, basking in the warm glow of the embers. It is getting late, but neither of us are in the mood for sleep just yet. Thorn is reading a story aloud.

*“And their happiness, as it was founded on virtue, was complete.”* He sighs a little. “Another happy ending. I’m glad.”

I laugh. Thorn always treats the characters in books like real people. He is affronted whenever they are wronged and devastated when tragedy befalls them, as if they were friends of his. It is utterly endearing.

“You are smiling at me, Rose.”

“That is because you are very sweet,” I reply.

“They deserved their happy ending,” Thorn says testily, “after everything they’ve been through—”

“I am not disputing that in the slightest.”

“Oh. Excellent. For a moment, I thought you were teasing me.”

“Whenever I say you are sweet, I am not teasing you.” I reach up and tug his ear. “Other times, however—”

“Oh, Rose!” He pulls my hand away, but then he holds it, his thumb gently caressing my palm. “Rose,” he says again, softly.

I have a feeling he is going to say something, but then he doesn’t speak. “You say my name a lot, did you know?”

“Do I?” Thorn looks genuinely surprised. “I didn’t realise. I suppose I just like the way it sounds.”

“So do I.” He looks at me, and my cheeks feel oddly hot. “On your lips,” I add, and my face feels even hotter.

I get up from my seat beside him and move towards the writing desk. I barely know what I am doing, but it was too hot where I was before, and here, beside the window, is a semblance of coolness. I can see a heap of papers in the corner; he has been trying to practise, with fair degrees of success. One page contains a full poem.

“What’s this?” I ask, holding it up.

Thorn rushes to his feet. His tail twitches nervously. “Ah, that, yes, um, no—”

I begin to read. “*Like flames, my heart has flickered, felt before—*”

“It’s just a work in progress—” He moves to snatch it from me, but I dive under his arm and dart to the other side of the room, giggling.

*“Yet never till those eyes held mine  
Did it move, and beat, like unfurling wings  
To fall in rhythm with each breath she took.  
O, that I have lived to feel such joy,  
And weather each hard pain it brings.  
Endure her closeness, heart I beg thee,  
For each step she takes from me is hell,  
And each moment with her bliss, heaven-kissed.  
Such sweetness turns my withered heart to spring.  
Whenever I should die, cut it from my chest  
It lies there in my breast, my heart, rose-shaped.”*

All my laughter dies away. I look up from the page, and my eyes hold Thorn’s. It is as if our gazes have been threaded together. In the fireplace behind him, a log collapses. Sparks flutter up the chimney while ash spills onto the grate. Neither of us speaks.

“It’s just a... writing exercise.” Thorn says. His voice is feather soft, and deep as darkness. “A silly thing—”

“It was beautiful,” I breathe. “Where did those words come from? How long did that take you—”

“It was just there...” he replies. “Written. In the space between...”

“The space between?”

He comes closer. “In the space between. In the only between that matters.”

The clock on the wall chimes two. Two? I look at Thorn in shock, and his face mirrors mine. “Good lord, it’s late!” I laugh. “What would my

Nanny say? Up until two with a man after dark... I do hope he declares his intentions!"

Thorn looks at me and opens his mouth. It hangs there for a while, unspeaking, frozen.

"Will you marry me, Rose?"

"What?"

That is quite possibly one of the worst things you can ever say to someone who has just asked to marry you, but I am sure, at first, that I must have misheard. He cannot be serious. Thorn looks as shocked as I am.

"Forgive me," he says after an age. "That just... slipped out. But I should like an answer. Yes or no, without fear."

I smile. "As if I could ever fear you, dearest."

His eyes light up. "Is that a—"

"No, Thorn."

All at once, the light that has been there vanishes, extinguished in an instant.

"For a start," I say breezily, "there is no priest to marry us, and what would my family say, if I did not invite them to the wedding? I do like to do things properly."

Thorn laughs.

"What amuses you so?"

"Your answer. I have never imagined such a pleasant rejection."

"I am sorry it was a rejection."

"Do not be sorry," he says, and for a minute, I almost believe he means it. "Goodnight, Rose."

"Goodnight, Thorn."



I make it to my room and slither into the seat beside the desk, dropping my face into my hands. Three short cracks sound seconds later, but I do not look up.

“You asked her to marry you,” says Margaret, almost tonelessly.

My mortification returns, in full force. I feel as if I’ve been hit by a carriage. Heat swells within me.

“I know. What was I thinking?” I meant to say, *I love you, stay with me*, but somehow, I rushed right ahead to *marry me*. What was I thinking?

“It’s not what I would have led with,” Ariel says, as tactfully as she can manage. “I liked the poem. I think you could have been more explicit.”

I bang my head against the desk.

“What are you doing?” Margaret shrieks. “That is mahogany!”

“I’m trying to knock myself unconscious so I no longer have to look Rose in the eye after asking her to *marry me*.”

“Yes, that did rather come out of the blue,” Margaret says.

“Not helpful!” I look up at the three of them. I wish I could see their faces, read their thoughts. Then again, I see Rose’s all the time and I barely know what’s going on in there. How can I know someone so well and yet have no idea what she’s thinking? “Do you think she knows?”

“Knows what?” they ask.

“That I’m madly, ridiculously, overly, irrevocably, undeniably... you know.”

“In love with her?”

“Yes.”

“I think she’s a fool if she doesn’t,” Margaret says promptly. “But then the human heart... and Rose is, bless her, not particularly... *in tune*, shall we say, with her emotions.”

“The girl would literally rather wrestle a wolf than confront her feelings,” adds Ariel.

“So she doesn’t know?”

“I don’t know!”

I return to banging my head against the desk. It seems more productive. “I don’t know how to make it more obvious!”

“Here’s an idea: *you tell her.*”

“What, I just go to her room, right now, and yell, ‘*Rose, I love you*’ in her face?”

“Well, I wouldn’t yell it...”

“I can’t do it now! I have to pick the right moment—”

“Dear boy, you have had so many, it’s frankly embarrassing.”

“I can’t do this.”

“You’ll have to, if you ever hope to be human again.”

“I don’t care about that.” I say it without thinking, but my words hang in the air for a while afterwards, as if waiting for me to take them back. *I don’t care about being human again.* I don’t care about... about everything I thought I cared about. “I just want to be with her.”

“You really think that way?” Margaret asks. “You would be happy to remain as you are?”

“Yes,” I reply slowly. I hardly know it until I say it. “I don’t mind being like this. It has disadvantages, to be sure, but so does every body I suppose.”

“What changed?”

“I saw her,” I whisper, and remember a moment, what feels like so long ago, when she smiled at me for the first time, and sunlight seemed to spill out of her. “And she saw me. I care nothing for what I look like any more. Not if I am with her. Not if she is happy.”

All three fairies fall silent for a moment. It is a loud, shocked, thoughtful, invasive silence.

“Don’t you want to... you know...” Ariel starts, “Make the beast with two backs, if you’ll pardon the pun?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Whilst that would be preferable,” I concur, glad of my lack of red cheeks, and the fact she does not know my dreams, “and indeed desirable... it is not essential to my happiness, if it is not essential to hers.”

I can live without carnal love, something I have only ever imagined. I cannot live without her. And not just because of the curse. A normal, mortal feeling clutches me. I simply cannot live without her, now that my soul has known the shape of hers.

Margaret sighs with the weight of a thousand thoughts, none of which she voices. “Oh, my dear boy,” she says instead, fluttering around my face. “I’m going to bring you some tea. Ophelia, run a bath. Ariel—”

“I’m going to check on Rose,” she declares. “Back in a tick.”

She vanishes, leaving me alone with Ophelia. She turns on the taps, filling a quiet corner of the room with steam. I’m in no mood for heat, but I know that sleep will evade me. I lower myself into the tub obediently, not caring that it isn’t ready.

“Why do you love her?” asks Ophelia, humming by my side. “Why her, and none of the others?”

I pause for so long on the answer that I imagine Ophelia believes I have no intention of replying. It should be an easy question to answer—and perhaps it is—but there is so much more to it than, “I simply do.”

There is no simply about it, despite how easily I fell for her.

I liked her when she laughed, when she smiled, when she cried, when little parts of her soul spluttered to surface. I liked seeing who she really was, because the more I unravelled, the more I felt revealed, too. The more she showed, the more I felt her pressing into me, until who I was and who she was became almost one indivisible being.

For all that I cannot always read her, I know her shape; I know the person she is. I know I love whatever is hidden between the uncovered pages of that tome. She is far from an open book, but every page I decipher I love more than the last. I want to reread and read on in equal desperation to know more, to understand better, to discover. She is a kind person. She likes solitude, but is sure of herself. She dreams deeply, and disappears into a new world as thoroughly as I do every time she reads. There is something in our shared wonder of a tale that connects us, threads of woven gold in long-forgotten volume.

“Because she is inside of me,” I tell Ophelia. “Because whatever I am clings to her. I feel like I did not know myself until I knew Rose, and now whatever I’ve become cannot untangle itself from the snare of her soul.”

Ariel returns. I sit up sharply.

“Well?”

“Rose is doing a very good job of pretending to be asleep, so nothing to report.”

She drops down on the bed, and I imagine her spread out there like she once was when she had a body, limbs sprawled everywhere.

I sink under the water and wish I could drown myself. “What am I going to say to her tomorrow?”

“I suggest—”

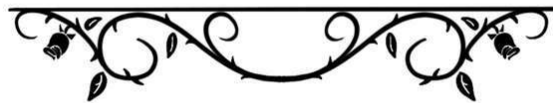
“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Then why ask? You already know what you should do.”

I do, but taking back words and replacing them with the ones I should have uttered is no simple task, and fills me full of quiet dread.



## ROSE



I lie awake in bed with Thorn's question playing over in my head. What did he mean when he asked me to *marry him*? It was simply such a strange question, phrased so oddly, as if he were asking me on a walk. Yet his pain at my refusal seemed genuine.

More than anything, my own answer confuses me. I was so quick to refuse his offer, but I did not wish to reject him. Nor did I wish to do so simply to spare him pain.

Perhaps he does not see marriage as I do. Perhaps he does not understand. Perhaps he has been here alone so long that he does not know what it means to be husband and wife. He may only know what he has read, and believes marriage to be simple companionship. Is that all he requires from me? Is that not what we already have?

And that poem. *Those words*. Were those words mine? He did not say as much, and yet he did, in every word, in every look and gesture.

It takes me many hours to sleep, and when I finally do, it is fitful. I dream I am in the meadow with Thorn, and a cold dark mist rips him away from me. Seconds later, I wake in my bed, shaking so uncontrollably, it is all I can do to stop myself from calling for him in the dark.





Although we spend the next few days in each other's company, we do a terrific job of ignoring each other in the politest way possible. We converse about the weather, we report factually what is happening in the books we are engrossed in. We compliment the food, the flowers, the gardens. Not a personal word is uttered. We barely speak each other's names.

We mention nothing about the proposal, if indeed that's what it was. I am too afraid to ask the fairies if they saw it, or if they know what Thorn was thinking when he asked me. What answer scares me more? Thorn knowing full well what the question meant, or having no idea at all?

Do I regret my answer?

Yes. No. Maybe. Sort of.

The worst of it all is wondering if my answer would have been different if our bodies were as similar as our minds. He is so much better than I. If we were cut the same...

But we are not, and the space between us is as uncrossable as ever.



The night of the full moon comes. Thorn is surprised to hear that I will be coming with him again, but he appears pleased considering the distance between us the last few days. We go down to the dungeon early, hoping to avoid the disaster that befell us last month. Bramble and the fairies come with us like our own personal guard. Any last minute pleas for me to stay in the castle are ignored.

In any case, the concern is not necessary. Nothing happens. Perhaps Moya hasn't recovered from her last attack. Perhaps the magic of the

castle is too strong for her now. I do not think of it too much. I count my blessings and think about Thorn instead.

There is no need to lock him in immediately. All of us sit in the lighted corridor. We play games and chat to elevate the tension. I have never spoken with Ophelia or Margaret at any great length, but I learn more about them here. Margaret is a siren. She is somewhat miffed when I believe this is a type of mer creature that sits on rocks and lures men to their doom.

“I am part owl!” she declares stiffly. “And the luring men to their doom part is exaggerated!”

She used to be mistress of the robes, and, when required, the castle governess. She was clearly a respected member of this ancient court, used to being obeyed. Ophelia, I sense, is a little afraid of her.

She tells me she is a pixie, a small, winged humanoid creature, but her grandmother was a nymph, and therein lay her love of the outdoors and gardening.

“I hope you don’t mind me pottering around the flowerbeds—”

“Oh no, not at all!” she says. “They are meant to be shared!”

Ariel, as I suspected, is a full-on fairy. She has little magical talent ‘apart from the ordinary’ but tells us all that her ‘wit’ is her true power. Everyone else groans at this.

“I don’t know why you’re all laughing. The Queen herself said, ‘Ariel, thou beist the most talented and most skilful of all of my domain, but thy wit biest thy greatest trait.’ True story.”

“I find this very difficult to believe,” says Thorn.

“The great thing about my wit is it doesn’t need to be believed to be real.”

When the hour approaches, the fairies vanish, promising to return to escort me back to the castle. Bramble stays by my side as Thorn climbs into the cell.

“I haven’t seen a shadow in a while,” I tell him.

“Me neither,” he admits. “Not since the last full moon. I wonder what changed?”

I feel like a lot has changed since then, but I don’t have the words or the courage to explain it.

I turn around as Thorn sheds his clothes. We sit together in the silence for a little while, our backs to each other. We still have a few minutes.

“Rose, if you could...” begins Thorn, his voice careful, “if you could go back now—or today, or tomorrow—would you?”

I’m not sure what he’s asking. “But I can’t go back.”

“If you could. Would you go back?”

“I... I have to see my family again. They have to know that I’m all right. And I miss them. I miss them so much.”

*But I might not go tomorrow. And I would not go unless I knew I could come back.*

I try to banish that old fear from my mind. It is another five months until I have to make that impossible decision. What was I hoping would change in the extra time I was given? Things have changed, but not for the better, not here. The changes will only make the decision worse.

Because I have to go home. I have to.

“I would not go home tomorrow,” I say. It is all that I can manage.

“Why not?” I feel him tense behind me. The change is not far off.

“I’m not done here,” I say. “I’ve still got to break the curse, remember?”

Thorn snorts. “Is that all?” he asks.

“No,” I reply truthfully, even though I want to ask is *‘Isn’t that enough?’*

His body pulses. I wheel around, sticking my hands through the bars and rub the back of his neck. His forehead presses against mine.

“Why... why do you want to stay?”

“I told you before; I don’t want to leave you.”

Despite the pain, Thorn manages to smile. “You didn’t say that before.”

“Didn’t I?”

“No. You... you implied... you... needed to... not... wanted.”

“They’re the same thing, where you’re concerned.”

When I open my eyes, when they’re finished with flushing out tears, it is clear that Thorn is gone for the night. I do not know if he heard me.

\*

The following morning, when we go to pick him up, it’s clear that he has had a rough night. He is a bit scratched up—nothing that a quick trip to the fountain doesn’t fix—and obviously exhausted. We manage to have breakfast together, but then I insist he goes to bed. It is a testament to how tired he is that he accepts this without question.

I spend a few hours by myself, but I’m hardly better off. I did not sleep much either, huddled under my covers, trying not to imagine Thorn in the dungeon, prowling the stones, howling, claws tearing at the walls.

Covering my ears did nothing to block out the sound of his voice rattling in my head.

Eventually, I give up trying to fight sleep. I tiptoe back to Thorn's room. He is sleeping on his side, half under a quilt, most of his limbs spread out in front of him like an oversized cat. His ears prick up as I enter, and he opens his eyes.

"Rose?" he asks in a daze.

"Ssh..." I creep across to the bed, pressing my knees into the mattress, and slip under the coverlet. Our legs knock together. I put my hand on his cheek, gently thumbing his lip. "Don't say anything." I turn around, bending my back into the hollow of his torso, and lay my head against his arm. "Are you comfortable, with me like this?"

He nods, and lays his own head next to mine. His hair brushes the back of my neck. He pulls it away, and his fingers skim my skin. I feel his breath there, hot and full.

He pulls the covers up to my shoulders, and then gingerly drapes his arm around my middle, unsure of where to put himself. I grab it securely, wrapping it tightly in my own, and clutch it to my chest.

Two hot tears ease out of my eyes. I pray he cannot feel them. I swallow, kiss his hand, and wriggle more firmly into him. It takes a little time, but his body relaxes.

For a few hours, I sleep soundly. Blissfully. Then I dream.

I cannot remember what it is about, but I wake aching on the inside. My stomach feels hollow, my throat parched and raw. I lie awake for several hours, listening to him breathing, and hope that his dreams are sweeter than mine.



I leave before he wakes up, and finish the rest of my day alone. The next morning, he is considerably brighter, but says nothing about me coming to his room. I wish so badly to crawl into his arms again, to lie beside him in that way, but I cannot. It is not right, not allowed, not proper. It is too much, and not enough. Not enough at all.

The following evening, we are sitting together in stony silence. Thorn asks me if he's done something wrong.

"No, not you," I reply, as softly as I can manage. I don't think it works.

"Then... you?"

"It isn't that simple."

"Could you try to explain it?"

"No."

I wish to all the world I could. I wish I could tell him *I care for you so much that it's breaking me*. I wish I could explain how wretched *this* makes me feel, and how none of it's his fault, but it's not fair, and I hate it, and I want to go home, and I don't want to go home—I don't want to go anywhere he isn't.

But the words won't come. They get chewed up between my mind and my mouth, and the thoughts alone try to choke me.

Thorn falls silent for a while. "Are you missing your family?"

Yes. No. Not all the time. Sometimes more than ever and sometimes I don't even think of them. I'm forgetting what they feel like. I want to speak to Honour. I want to curl up in my little nook and shut away the rest of the world and just—

*Just not be the me that I am now. Not be the me that you have made me.*

"Yes," I say, not caring if it hurts him. "Yes, I miss them."

Thorn nods, but says nothing else. I am glad he doesn't try to comfort me, I would push him away.

I pick up the next book in my pile. It is one of my least favourite books. It is about a boy and a girl, young, vain, vapid, who fall in love one "magical" night and pledge to love each other always. Unfortunately, she is engaged to another man, and he is due to fight in a war. Nothing much happens between them, as he is sent off to battle the very next day. Less than a week later, she kills herself rather than marry another. Her lover, hearing of her death, dies in the fray.

I hated the characters, their sudden, unbelievable love story, their unbearably over-dramatic ends. If they had really known each other, I reasoned, I would have felt more pity for them. If they had known each other for years—or even months—I would have found it more believable. If they had corresponded throughout the war, if you could see the slow descent into hopelessness, I would have cared, rooted for them.

It was one of my mother's favourites. She found it romantic. I never did. Not remotely. But now there exists in me the smallest twinge of pity. The slightest inch of understanding. For now I know what it is like not to want to live without someone.

I snap the book closed and throw it on the fire. The pages blacken in seconds, edges curling, flames tightening around the cover.

"Rose!" Thorn leaps off his seat. "What are you doing?"

I stare at the title as it is licked away by the flames. "It's a bad book," I say coldly. "I didn't like the ending."

I turn away and rush upstairs, only half-knowing why I want to cry.

"I never thought that I could be driven crazy by any individual person," says a voice, "but that was before I met you."

I do not look up, but I can feel Ariel hovering nearby. I don't want to speak to her right now. I don't want to speak to anyone.

"You and him. You are driving me insane. Just. Tell. Him. How. You. Feel."

"It's not that simple—"

"Three little words—"

"It would never be three," I say firmly. "And you act like... like explaining it would be the conclusion of it all. Like it would solve everything."

"It would. Believe me."

"No, it wouldn't. It would be the beginning and end of everything."

"Are you apprehensive because he's... you know, a beast?"

"He is not a beast."

"So you keep saying. So what's the issue?"

"The fact that there are some... fundamental biological differences between the two of us is... potentially problematic."

"I'm sensing that's not the only reason."

"There's my family," I say pointedly. "I can't have both, and yet... I think I have to. I cannot choose between them and him. I cannot choose between two parts of myself."

Ariel cannot think of anything to say to this. She goes away. A few minutes later, there's scratching at the door. It clicks open of its own accord, and Bramble jumps up on the bed. He whimpers and presses his nose to my face. I can deal with a dog, it's just people and voices—

including my own—that I cannot process. I wrap my arms around him and cry into his fur.

Maybe the castle isn't the only thing that's cursed. I think I might be too.



I drag myself back to my room, stopping myself from checking in on Rose, and slump down on the bed. Margaret and Ophelia appear with tea, but I have no appetite for it. I keep thinking of the book in the fire, how Rose just threw it away even though she loves books so much. What was it about the tale that upset her so much?

Or was it something else? Some other fury that drove her to destruction? I linger on the edge of that feeling myself.

Ariel comes buzzing into my room. “Developments!” she shrieks. “Serious ones!”

I leap off the bed and bound towards her. Margaret and Ophelia materialise bedside me.

“Rose?”

“It’s *always* Rose,” she groans, rolling her form in lieu of her eyes. “Nothing else happens here. Literally nothing.”

“What did she say—”

“I told her that all it would take to end all of this... *melodrama*... would be three little words...”

My heart thuds. “You didn’t.”

“I did. And that’s not the important part. The important thing is she told me that *it would never just be three*.”

I pause, waiting for her to continue. “Well?”

“Well, that’s it, isn’t it? That’s her admitting it.”



“Hmm, it doesn’t *sound* like an admission,” Ophelia admits woefully.

“But... it was,” Ariel insists. “She’s saying there’s more to say! More than ‘I love you’. Not less.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“Well...” Ariel hops about.

“Ariel...”

“She may have suggested that saying something along those lines wouldn’t solve everything.”

I groan inwardly, and turn back towards the bed. She may be right. It may not solve anything at all. And then where would we be?

It also wouldn’t solve everything if she didn’t mean them.

“Anything else?” whispers Ophelia.

“With some pushing, she did admit that the biological differences between the two of them were... ‘potentially problematic’.”

My stomach coils with dread. “Oh no...”

“But that’s good. It means she’s been thinking about it!”

“But surely that also means she’s not willing to...” Margaret searches for the right word, “*commit*.”

“What else?” I murmur.

Ariel sighs. “She says she can’t choose between you and her family, but she thinks she has to.”

She does, in the end. Is that what is holding her back? If only I could tell her, if only I knew for certain...*Love me, and you will have both. I would never make you choose—*

Maybe I will have to.

“She said she could not choose between two parts of herself,” Ariel whispers. “Two parts of herself. Can you not hear, Thorn, what you are to her?”

But am I enough?

“You don’t seem pleased,” Ariel continues. “I’m telling you, she loves you! Just tell her and you’ll see—”

But if I’m wrong, I’ll die.

And she has reservations.

And I can’t let her know she killed me.

Yet I want her so much I think I might die of that alone.

“I’m going for a walk,” I tell them. “I need to clear my head.”

I wander down to the lake. The thin shard of mountain cuts across the surface of the water, and a spray of crystalline stars coats the skies. Beautiful. Haunting.

“Talk to me,” I pray to the only goddess I know, “let me know what it is you truly want. I will give it to you. No matter the cost.”



Rose continues to drift about like a phantom, spending hours shut up in her room with Bramble, emerging only at meal times. She avoids being alone with me, inventing tasks that need her attention if the fairies ever try to leave us unaccompanied.

She walks a lot around the gardens. They’ve suddenly grown cold, a chill rustling in the air. The leaves are beginning to brown, the flowers are drying, wilting. Our perpetual summer has at last come to an end.

Autumn is upon us. The garden is dying, and I feel my hope withering with it. Is it Rose that is doing it? What does it mean?

I catch her staring at the trees.

“What are you thinking of?” I ask her.

“I am thinking that all things have their time,” she replies. “And that everything must die.”



That night, I go to the Hall of Mirrors. Initially, I have thoughts of seeing Mother, of glimpsing some memory of a better time. But instead I find my gaze drifting to the Mirror of Desire.

*Don’t look,* says a voice inside me.

I ignore it. I don’t care if it hurts. I just want to see her—us—even if it’s never to be. Even if this is the one and only time I ever see us truly

together, I want it. I *need it*.

I lower my gaze as I step towards the pane, half hoping something will stop me.

Nothing does. I look up.

And there she is, desire made flesh, Rose in the glass, half undressed, her arms tangled up in mine, and I am human, and beautiful too, and her eyes are glassy with longing when she looks at me.

She will never look at me that way.

I stagger backward, reeling from a sickness deep inside, and fall into the sharp gaze of the Mirror of Truth.

Seeing myself in the Mirror of Desire was one thing, when it was a desire, something not real. Seeing me in this is another.

There I am. Finally. I see who I truly am.

A man. Nothing beautiful like Rose implied. An average, ordinary man. Dark-haired, like my fur. A straight nose, fine cheekbones.

A human. *I am a human*.

And yet I will never be one, because she is never going to set me free.

It's as much of a fantasy as the Mirror of Desire.

I think of the book blackening in the fireplace, the need to scrub out things you can't control. I have no book to burn.

But I hurl a chair into the image and scream as if the change is upon me.

The mirror shatters in an instant. Glass coats the floor, shimmering like stardust. I pick up the chair again and crash it against the remaining pieces, letting the shards slide to the ground, frost in sunlight.

"Thorn!" Rose appears in the door. "What are you doing?"

I carry on as if I cannot hear. She is a ghost, after all. I abandon the chair and throw my fists against the Mirror of Desire. A hard, thin pain slides against my fingers. I barely feel it, even when the ground is dusted with blood.

"THORN!" Rose throws down her candlestick and races around the room, toppling the others until only a dim sliver of light pools in from the open door. Reflections turn to shadow. The ghosts scurry away.

I drop to the floor. Rose appears by my side, her hand hovering over my shoulder.

"Thorn?"

I groan. "I am sick of seeing."

"Seeing what?"

She cannot be so clueless...

I look at her, but cannot stand the weight of her gaze, cannot stand to look at what I cannot have. I turn away, but she grabs my face. "Listen to me," she hisses, "I know what you are! I know *exactly* who you are."

I seize her wrists roughly. "Then what am I, Rose?" My voice is hoarse, hard, almost... almost monstrous.

With her tiny wrists in my grip, and the bitterness burning in my chest, I have never felt more like a monster.

Even Rose looks shocked, but she pulls her hands away and places one palm against my cheek, the other over my chest.

"You are just like me," she says. "Your soul is shaped like mine."

*But what does it matter what our souls are shaped like, if you do not want its container? What does the shape matter if mine will never be free?*

Rose tugs at my hands. "Come, let me help you—"

I jerk them away from her. Why does she only care when I'm in pain? Why is that the only time she wants to be with me?

It's pity. It's all just pity. Anything more just stems from that. She just doesn't want me to be alone, and she doesn't want to be alone herself. If there's love, it's morphed or misplaced or just not quite right. A product of circumstance. Something that will fade when she's returned to her family.

I stand up.

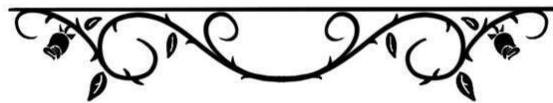
"Thorn! Let me help you!"

"Like you let me help you?"

She says nothing else, and I march up to the terrace alone without looking back.



## ROSE



Thorn refuses to let me bandage his hands. He marches up to the roof terrace alone, while I sit in the remnants of what had become one of my favourite parts of this strange, beautiful place. A large shard of glass sits at my feet. I pick it up, and the image flickers. The Mirror of Desire. In the little fragment, I see myself and Thorn, and my family. All of us, together. All of us happy and smiling. A future that can never be.

Suddenly, I want the image smashed also.

The fairies arrive to clean up the mess, but I hiss them away. They say nothing to me. I go back to my room and wait for morning. At first light, I walk down to the meadow, and I imagine Freedom's voice again. I should have taken his hand. It would have spared me this.

But then Thorn would probably be dead, and my life would not be any easier.

I go to breakfast.

"Nice walk?" asks Thorn. It sounds almost mean, as if he hopes it wasn't.

"I went to the meadow." I make my words sound like an insult too. *I went to the meadow because I wanted to get away from you.*

This stops any conversation. We eat in silence. Eventually, it gets so awkward that the fairies trickle in and try to generate pleasantries.

"So, the ball tomorrow!" Ophelia chimes. "I'm very excited. Are you excited?"

Neither one of us replies.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Ariel says loudly. “I’ve prepared some divine music.”

“And you will positively die when you see my ball gown!” Margaret beams.

Thorn growls—actually growls—at her. They hush immediately. I drop my spoon with a clatter and walk away, running to my room as soon as I am out of sight. I slam the door and throw myself down on the bed, expecting to cry. But I do not. Instead, I punch my pillow, tear at the sheets, and sit there shaking. Anger and misery claw continuously at my insides.

Later, he knocks at the door.

“Yes?” I bark.

There is a long pause before he speaks. When he does, his voice is quiet. Still. Measured. “Do you still want to have this ball?”

I wait a while before replying too. “The others have worked so hard.”

“Do you still want it?”

Another pause. “Yes.”

He does not speak, and for a moment, I think he must have slunk away. I get off the mattress and cross the room, but I know he is still there before I reach the door, before I hear his breath, before I feel his body pressed against the other side of the barrier. Something of him seems to burst out of the corridor, suffusing the air between us. I can feel it as keenly as temperature when I reach out to touch the door.

“Thorn... I have almost another five months here. I don’t think we can continue being mad at each other.”

He exhales softly, almost as if he’s in pain. “I’m not mad at you.”

“I’m not mad at you, either.”

There doesn’t seem to be anything else we can say to each other. Nothing we say will fix the mess we’re in and yet...

Nothing will change.



In the hours leading up to the ball, the fairies are all a-flutter, moving swiftly between my room and Thorn's. Even Bramble is caught up in the excitement; he cannot decide who he wants to be with, and keeps dashing back from one room to the next.

I am bathed and anointed with perfumes and oils. My hair is cleaned and combed and curled. I am scrubbed within an inch of my life. My nails are tidied. It is hard not to feel a little excited by the fairies' enthusiasm.

Finally, I stand in my undergarments in front of a screen. All the fairies are here for this part.

"Are you ready?" asks Margaret.

I nod. The screen is pulled back, and behind it is the most beautiful gown I have ever beheld. It's white and gold, simple and extravagant, billowing and dainty, made with shimmering thread and layers of soft white gossamer.

"Do you like it?" I see a flash of Ariel in the mirror, surrounded by Ophelia and Margaret.

"It's perfect." My voice sounds like a ghost's. "Thank you."

I slide into it easily, the laces pulled by their feathery touch. The dress has a beautiful weight, and yet it fits like a second skin. It could be made of clouds, I'm so sure I am floating.

I stare at myself in the mirror as invisible fingers weave pearl beads and flowers through my hair. I'm like a stranger. No, not a stranger, not at all, almost the opposite. I am myself, but a part I have never seen before. The more I am done up, the more I am revealed. *Hello me, where have you been?*

No one presses on me any adornments, any jewellery. The dress is decoration enough. The only thing that stays is Thorn's necklace, which matches perfectly, not that I would remove it if it didn't.

I glide towards the ballroom with my heart thumping wildly in my chest. I have rarely cared about how other people perceive my outward appearance. Why does it matter to me, how Thorn sees me?

When he startles as I enter the room, when he gets up, knocking the chair slightly, mouth agape, I know why.

He is the only one who sees me. His eyes alone are the only ones that matter. The only eyes I care for.

"You... you look..." He gulps. "You look beautiful, Rose. Otherworldly."

The word is a thousand times more powerful, more real, coming from him. I must be blushing furiously. "A statement that applies to us both."

He chuckles. "Which one?"

"Both."

He's dressed in a dark blue suit with gold adornments. His hair has been clipped, and he smells faintly of cinnamon. His eyes are brighter than ever. Soft music plays as we sit down to dine through five courses of the most exquisite food I have ever eaten. The conversation is light, slow but not uncomfortable. I am intimately aware of everything I am doing, everything around me.

"Ophelia's flowers are magnificent," I declare, looking at the garlands strung from the ceiling, wrapped around the pillars. I have never seen such a display.

"She has worked hard on them," says Thorn.

After dessert, we step out onto the balcony for a minute. There are a few final rays of sunset left. The nights are getting longer, I realise with a pang. There is a sharp change in the landscape. Browns and reds dominate where blues and greens used to be.

"A fine evening," I declare. "Reminds me of the one that Tromeo and Lessida spent together, before..."

*Before he went off to war, and they were separated for years.*

Thorn leans against the railing. "You've read that many times."

"I wanted to know why you liked it so."

"And? Have you worked it out?"

"I think you're a romantic. I think you like the selflessness of their love, and the endurance of it."

Thorn tilts his head, quiet and contemplative. "And you? What do you think of it?"

"I... I'm not a romantic."

Thorn snorts.

"I'm not," I continue. "I might enjoy reading the occasional romance, but I don't... I don't *feel* it like you do."

At this, Thorn's expression stiffens, the glassiness in his eyes turning ice-hard. Have I insulted him in some way? It was meant to be a compliment.

"Rose," he asks carefully, "what do you think of love?"

"It makes a fine story," I reply.



Thorn swallows. “And for yourself?”

“I’m not sure that romance is to be a part of my story.” I shake my head. *No, no, it’s already part of my story. It’s already branded into my bones. It’s just not going to be part of—* “my future.”

“Why... why not?”

“I’m not sure I have it in me.”

Thorn’s gaze falls away from him. I know I’ve probably disappointed him. Once more, I wish for the ability to claw back words, to make them as perfect as print, to place what I feel into a balm that will heal us both—

But no such magic exists. There is no miracle cure for us.

Music stirs from inside. I turn to Thorn. “Will you dance with me?”

“Of course,” says Thorn, and then, a little sadly, “I can deny you nothing.”

I try to ignore his sadness. Tonight, I want us to be happy. Just for tonight.

*One night, fate, I pray. I just need one night.*

We step into the ballroom. Thorn’s hand slides around my waist. Our hands lock together, and we begin to dance.

When the music sings, it breathes. Veins pump through invisible strings. Piano keys transform into bone. The room lifts, sways, moves with us, transforming from stone and marble and glass into living flesh. I am heavy and light at the same time, a puppet on a string and utterly free. The music exists like an extension of my soul, of our souls. I can feel it flowing in and out, like the ebb of a tide. I do not know where it begins and I end. The colours of the room swirl together, more vibrant and more beautiful in their proximity to each other. I cannot tell the floor from the ceiling. Starlight floods the room on the curling shadow of night. I am caught in a shimmering, glittering bubble of gold and silver and blue and white.

There is a moment, a split second, where I almost feel as if I have left my own body. I am somewhere else in the room, beholding this scene, wanting to capture and preserve every sliver of it.

But there are sights that can never be painted, too majestic to be forged from paper and ink. This is one of them.

The music ends. I am in Thorn’s arms, my head resting against his chest, my eyes tightly shut. I can almost feel the colour trickling away. The music slithers off like a snake. There is no starlight now, only shadow.

It is not enough. I want to hold him tighter, faster. It is impossible to believe that we are two separate people at all. There should be no space between us. I can hear his heart beating, and for a moment, forget that it is his at all. It is my heart that I feel in his chest. I feel that if I keep holding him, our two hearts will press together into one, and this emptiness I feel at not being able to have him in the way I want to will cease.

“Rose.” My name eases past his lips, part sigh, part question. He wraps his arms around me until I am cocooned inside his embrace.

I wish for words to explain this to him, but there are none. I ease back, for fear this longing will break me. I feel as if I am standing on the precipice of a pool. I want so badly to dive in, but I cannot. I am held back, I am barred. I know I will never even touch those waters, and suddenly I am dying of thirst. A clock chimes, echoing round the chamber like a drum.

“It is late,” I say. I edge towards the doors. I cannot take my eyes from him, from his. They are mirrors of my own. I turn with poisonous reluctance.

I have not stepped one foot across the threshold before a hand fastens around my wrist. I hear my name, murmured breathlessly, and a second later I am up in his arms again, my face against his neck, arms fastened around him.

He knows, he knows how I feel.

Oh God, moving away, disentangling myself is so hard. I cannot look at him this time, I cannot. I race up to my room, not daring to look back, and slam the door shut behind me. I want to lock the door, but what against? Not him; I would never shut him out. What I want to shut out is the injustice. I want him in here, by my side, as always, and I want to throw away the world that makes *us* impossible. How can I dissociate him from our problem? They are one in the same. But it does not feel that way. He is he and I am me and the simple fact that he is what he is does not change—

Does not change. Cannot be changed. However much that does not stop me feeling the way I do, it does not change.

The fairies have set up a bath for me by the fireplace. I am glad of their absence, of their hovering, sad forms. I cannot deal with others right now. There is nothing I can say to them.

I shed my clothes, ripping away the fabric and hurling it to the floor. If only we could change ourselves so easily.

I sink into the waters, breaking the surface with my mouth and letting the salt spoil the water. I hear Thorn prowling the corridors, pausing ever-so-slightly at my door. I pray he cannot hear me cry.

I crawl damply into my bed, pressing my face deep into the pillow. I bite the feathers and do not scream. I remember his heartbeat. I feel mine.

Nothing changes.

I want to say I hate him. I want to scream it. It feels—in that moment—like the biggest truth I know. *I hate him I hate him I hate him*. But I don't hate him. The opposite is true. What I hate, what I truly cannot stand, is what I cannot change.

That's what he hates, too.

It has been a while now since I have thought of home, but tonight, I can think of nothing else but how much I long to be there, and be the person I was before I came to this cruel, enchanted place.



I prowl the corridor for some time, hearing the desperate ripping of fabric, the sound of water running, Rose sinking into the tub.

I think I hear her sobbing.

*What have I done?*

"I love you, Rose," I whisper to her closed door, certain she cannot hear me.

I realise then, with resounding clarity, exactly what I have done in keeping her here. I have been so preoccupied with her hurting me, I have barely paused to think about how I am breaking her heart, too.

I know what I need to do.

And I know, with absolute certainty, that it will kill me.



*If she can't love me, let me fall out of love with her, I pray to whatever gods will hear me. If I can't love her... don't let me endure this any longer. People have fallen out of love before. Break the spell love holds me under. Let it be done with me.*

It soon will be. When she leaves, she will take my heart with her, and I will die assuredly as if a knife was plunged in my chest. That death would be quicker, less painful.

I wish I didn't have to die. I wish I could forget her. I wish I could fall out of love with her.

And at the same time, I'm still glad I met her. Even after all of this.

Rose doesn't leave her room the next day, or the day after that. Any hope of some reprieve, of her emerging from her own despair and explaining things to me withers and dies. I think she has already tried to explain it, and I'm just fooling myself. She loves me, but not like I love her. Not enough. Not like that.

I still go to her three times.

"Talk to me, Rose. Let me help."

"Rose, please! Just let me in!"

"Tell me what's wrong."

Sometimes, I think she whispers something back, but I cannot hear her.

The fairies try to speak to her too, but she's utterly despondent and barely eating. They report little of what she says and even less of what she looks like, but their silence speaks volumes. She is wasting away.

And I am letting her.

On the third day, I try once more. "You know I would do anything to make you happy. Anything within my power. Tell me what you want, Rose."

She does not. I sigh, my chest caving.

"Do you want me to leave?"

Silence. Finally, I summon the courage to ask the question I am dreading.

"Do you want to go home?"

The ghost of an answer. "Yes."

There is no coming back from this. It is the final confirmation that I need. I breathe carefully, and slope back to my room.

Ariel appears before I reach it. "You better not be doing what I think you're going to—" she snaps.

I close the door in her face, and banish her from the room.



I take two days to myself. One is hoping for some last minute reprieve, for Rose to appear at my door and confess her affections, for her to tumble into my arms and weep and hold me until I unravel.

The second day I take for myself. I do not know how swiftly my end will come upon me, so I make everything neat and tidy, re-read parts of my favourite books, visit my mother's portrait and my father's tomb.

The gardens continue to wilt. I'm not sure I have much time left, if I'm to use them to power my opening of the gate.

I may have banished the fairies from my room, but they find other ways of getting around my commands, ambushing me elsewhere in the castle or leaving notes where I am certain to find them.

"I'm sorry," I tell them, "but I have to let her go. This curse is killing her as surely as it is killing me."

"But what if it's not her family that she's missing?" Ariel pleads. "What if it's you?"

"You heard her. She doesn't think love will be a part of her future."

"Because she *loves you*! Because she doesn't think she'll have another chance! She doesn't know what you are! She doesn't know she can have everything—"

"You don't know that either!" I bark. "Leave me. Speak to me no more tonight."

It's a flimsy instruction. When I get up the next morning at first light, she meets me on the way out of the castle. I have to do it today. I have been putting this off long enough.

"Don't—" she starts.

"I will command you from saying anything in my presence ever again if you try to stop me from opening the gate," I tell her. "I don't want to, but I will. I'd rather have your company. Walk with me?"

"Fine," she says, her form shrivelling.

She drifts beside me all the way down to the meadow.

"Where are Ophelia and Margaret?"

“They don’t want to watch this.”

I’m sure they’ll appear after she’s gone. I hope they will. I don’t want to be alone at the end.

I reach the wall of fog. I stare at it for the longest time, unblinking, unmoving. I don’t want it to work. I want it to stay closed. I want an excuse to keep her.

But if I have to spend another night listening to her sob herself to sleep, or knowing how much she is hurting, I might break just as easily.

I inhale deeply, feeling the faint rivulets of fairy magic I inherited from my mother glimmering through my veins. The garden breathes with me. I feel the ebb and flow of nature, the strings of life stirring through every branch, petal and leaf. I tug on them gently, easing them forward, pulling them into the fog and towards the gateway that separates us from the rest of the world.

I think of Rose’s family, of their faces, of the snatches of the cottage I saw in the mirror. I anchor the threads to that vision, assuring the gate will open where it is supposed to.

A click, a clack, like a key in a lock. The fog parts, and the way has opened.

In and out I breathe, painfully and with difficulty, and begin the slow walk back to the castle.

Ariel makes it to the corridor before she finds a way to sidestep my instructions, and flees across my path. I told her not to say anything as I opened the gate, but now it is open and she can say what she likes.

“Don’t do this!” she begs, her voice frantic, even angry.

“I must.”

“Just give it more time—”

“I’ve given it time enough. The garden is beginning to wilt. If I don’t do it now, she may not get another chance—” It’s too late now, anyway. I’ve probably already drained it.

“She can go back in five months. She will wait.”

“She is not happy. You know that.”

“You don’t know the reason—”

“Do you?”

Something moves in Rose’s room. I hear Bramble rolling off the bed, footsteps on the floor. “Do you two mind?” she hisses. “I’m trying to sleep!”

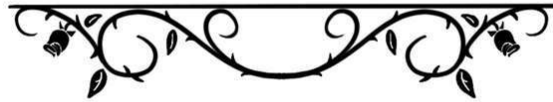
It's too late. There is no turning back. I dismiss Ariel with a wave of my hand and lean against the door. Anything to be a little closer to her, just a little longer.

"Rose," I say, "can you get dressed, and meet me in the foyer as soon as you are ready?"





## ROSE



Thorn's voice sounds solemn as stone but far from as steady. The closest I can compare it to is Nanny's voice, the day of mother's funeral, asking me to come downstairs. It is not a pleasant comparison.

"Yes," I say, just as seriously, "I'll be down soon."

I don't dress as quickly as I perhaps should. I am frightened of what Thorn has to show me. When I do meet him, his face is as taut as the skin of a drum. His clothes are crumpled, like he's been sleeping in them.

"Are you ready?" he asks, his voice sharp.

"For what?"

"Follow me."

When I do not, he comes back and grabs my wrist. He has never been so rough with me before. He is not hurting me, but this is not like him. Something is very, very wrong.

He marches me to the edge of the grounds then stops suddenly. He points at the meadow.

"What?" I ask. "What is it?"

He says nothing but gestures again.

"It's just the meadow."

Still, he doesn't reply. I follow his hand, past the waving wheat, past the stream—

The stream. The stream is there. *My* stream. And beyond that, my fields, my woods, my *home*.

It can't be true. It's an illusion, crafted by wishful thinking. I've been wanting to escape so much recently, my mind is making it up.

"The stream," I say dumbly, "it's not... How is this even... It's... it's not possible."

"Yes, it is."

I tear my eyes away from the sight to look at him, to assess the meaning behind the heaviness in his voice. But his eyes avoid me completely. A horrible, sinking feeling catapults inside.

"You? You... you can open it?"

"Yes."

I stare at him. It can't be. He would not have done this to me. He would not have—

"Ask the question, Rose."

"Have you... have you always known?"

"That I could open it? Yes. The entire time you were here."

"No. No." It's not true. It isn't possible. He saw how much I missed my family. He knew how much I wanted to return. He wouldn't have kept me here, he couldn't have... "I don't believe you," I say stubbornly. "You've... you've just figured it out, or... or something—"

"Why would I lie to help you hate me?"

"I don't know!" He is lying. He has to be. "Ariel!" I scream. "Where are you?"

"She won't come."

But she does.

"Tell me," I beg her. "Tell me he's lying. Tell me he hasn't known this the whole time."

Ariel is silent. Her little form shrivels. "He has always known," she says quietly.

Thorn's eyes drop away from mine. *No*.

"Ever since your mother," she continues.

"My... what?"

"Your mother was only here for a few weeks," she says. "It was the day of her wedding, when she came here. Thorn felt so terrible that she was to be trapped here away from your father, that he began to look for a way to open the gate prematurely."

"How can he do that?"

“A gift,” Thorn says hollowly, “from the fairy queen. I am a fey creature too, after all. I have a magic of my own.”

“It can’t... it can’t be as easy as that.”

“It isn’t,” Ariel interjects.

“Ariel—” Thorn growls warningly.

“A sacrifice of sorts needs to be made.”

“What... what sort of sacrifice?” I eye Thorn, who still avoids my gaze. My first thought is that he will have to pay with his life, and that is why he hasn’t let me go, because that is the only good reason he could possibly have kept me in the dark like this.

But then, he let my mother go, and he is still here.

“The garden,” he says quietly. “I drained the life of it to open the gateway for her.”

Flowers. A few flowers could have been spared to let me go home. He could have let me go the moment I—

No, not the moment I came. The garden was lifeless then.

“How long have you been able to send me home?”

His eyes raise a little; he is surprised I have worked it out. Why did he want me to believe that he always had the power?

“Since a little before it opened of its own accord,” he admits. “It did not seem to matter, then. You were going home anyway. I told myself that a few more weeks with you was worth the lie, was worth the garden...”

“But then I lost my chance.” Six weeks. He has kept my family waiting for six weeks. Lied to me, all that time. “But... why?”

“Because I was selfish,” Thorn says quietly. “Because I did not want to be alone again, and because I tried to convince myself that you wanted to stay.”

I remember his words during his last transformation. *Would you go home tomorrow, if you could?* I’d thought he’d wanted to know how much I cared for him, but he was just trying to justify his continual lies. His decision to keep me here against my will.

“Maybe I did want to!” I spit. “Maybe, if you’d just told me... I could have gone home, let my family know I was safe, and come back here! Maybe that’s exactly what I wanted!” I throw up my arms. “Why does everyone here *lie*?”

Ariel hovers closer. “Rose—”

“Go back to the castle, Ariel.” Thorn barks.

“There's more—”

“Ariel. Return.” Ariel's little form shrivels, as if she cannot believe what he has just said. “Fine,” she snaps, and promptly disappears.

“I don't want to hear the rest,” I whisper.

“You... you would have stayed?” Thorn's voice is hoarse. “You would have come back?”

“Maybe,” I say, knowing that that is exactly what I would have done. Gone home, let everyone know that I was safe and happy, and come back here. Because I was happy. Wondrously so. But can I ever be happy here again, knowing what I know now?

“But... why?” Thorn's voice is desperate, but I do not care.

“It doesn't matter now,” I say stonily. I turn to stare at the meadow. The stream trickles by. The fog is growing thicker. I do not think we have much time.

*Stop me, I beg, as I take three very slow steps forward. Say something. Anything. Make me understand.*

Am I honestly going to do this, walk away in anger, never to see him again? Once this door is slammed, it may be slammed for good. But how can I stay, when he has lied to me? And I've been saying for days that I want to go, that I need to go, that this is the only way to survive.

Why then does walking through it seem like a death sentence?

I cannot think of anything to say. All niceness is beyond me. Hurt dominates affection, betrayal triumphs over friendship. The mists call to me.

“Goodbye, Thorn,” I whisper.

I race off through the meadow, not looking back as the grass whips my skin, snatching at my clothes. I reach the stream and slide down the bank, tearing across the stones and up the other side, where I hit the ground with such force that I roll over, and stop, just for a second, catching my breath.

A horrible, fearful howl hollows out the wind, and I glance back at nothingness.

Was that him? No, it can't be him. The sound is beyond that of any living creature, any man or beast. It is monstrous, unearthly, a spirit raked through stone. It clings to the air, splits through my spine. My heart stills in my chest.

I scream his name, but there is no reply. I am all alone.



For the longest of times, I sit on the bank, watching the blank slab of grass on the other side where my home should be. No, the *castle* should be. This is my home. This is where I'm supposed to be.

I didn't say goodbye to the fairies. I didn't even think of Bramble. I didn't stop to pack, to gather my books, my ribbons, my dried flowers... all the little things I'd planned to take with me. How could I have just left? How could I have just left *him*?

"Rose," the ghost of a voice calls to me. Tentative, awed, familiar. It's him. He's followed me through, he's—

But it isn't. The voice comes from behind me. I turn with both joy and dread. Freedom is standing there, hand clasped to his mouth, looking as if Mama herself has returned from the dead. He races towards me with such force that he stumbles getting to my level, and his arms spasm as if he's afraid to reach out and touch me.

"I'm here," I say quietly.

Freedom launches forwards and yanks me into his arms. Within seconds I am folded inside his embrace, and Freedom—who hasn't cried since the day of Mama's funeral—is choking sobs into my hair and shaking like a kite in a storm. It seems to go on for hours.

When he eventually pulls back, his mouth is caught in a trembling smile. "Dear God, Rose, where have you been?"

"I accidentally wandered into a fairy realm." There is no other excuse I can come up with, and I imagine this is probably the least terrifying story that he might have conjured up to explain my absence these past months. "I'm back now."

Freedom laughs. "Of course you did."

"I did." There is very little proof I can offer him, of course. I have nothing with me, and he will surely think any of my fantastic tales a product of my imagination, except—"I saw you, in one of the magic mirrors there," I tell him. "Painting."

"The entire family knows I paint, Rose."

“You were painting *me*.”

At last, I see some flicker of belief.

“You were using lots of red,” I continue. “And I’m really not that pretty.”

Freedom smiles, an exhausted, relieved, shocked kind of smile, and then he hugs me again.



We walk home slowly, arm in arm, saying very little. I feel numb, like my legs could barely carry me unless I’m latched onto Freedom. I’m a child again, a little girl with skinned knees, being escorted home through the woods by her big brother.

Some energy returns when our house creeps into view, right on the edge of the village. It looks completely unchanged. There’s washing on the line. I see Papa’s jacket, and a dress that could be mine although it is probably Hope’s. The beautiful aroma of baking bread wafts from the window. I had forgotten the scent, living in the castle, separated from the smells of the kitchen.

There is a cool, pleasant chill in the air today. A few rays of sun shimmer down on a fair-haired boy rocking back and forth on the swing under the apple tree, singing at the top of his lungs.

“I’m swinging, I’m swinging, on a tree, tree, tree, yesiree, my tree, tree, tree—”

His dark-haired companion tutters, looking up from the book in her lap. Neither one has seen me yet. “Beau, can’t you sing something else?”

“I could... but I don’t want to,” he says matter-of-factly.

I want to say something. I want to open my mouth, sing a song from childhood, say something smart and witty that will make them laugh. But no words come. I hover by the garden gate, just watching them.

It is Beau who looks up first. There is a tiny, unfathomably long moment when his eyes fall to my face with a frown, as if I were a stranger. Then his gaze widens, his mouth opens, and my name escapes his lips in a half-whisper, half-scream. “Rose?”

Hope turns around gradually, as if it takes her a long time to process the word, but then she screams my name. Softly at first, and then louder and louder, and she is running towards me, Beau following, and I can't even move. When they reach me, we all sink to the ground, a mass of arms and hands and tears. There are no words, save my name, and a scream for, *"Papa! Papa!"*

Hope's voice is wretched and scratchy, almost like she's in pain, but she keeps screaming it as she clings to me and touches my face and Beau joins and paws me like a frantic puppy. There's a numbness in me, even though I am laughing and hugging them back. My flesh buzzes, overwhelmed, and the buzzing stretches to my temples.

Somewhere, in the corner of my eye, I register another presence. Papa is standing in the doorway. He's older than I have ever seen him. Beau and Hope are taller and ganglier than I remember, but he looks as if he has aged ten years. He leans against the door frame, rooted to the spot. Unable to move.

I shake off Hope and Beau, and make my way towards him.

"Papa," I say, and that is the only word I can manage, before we both dissolve into tears, and sob right there on the kitchen step.



Before long, I am seated in the kitchen, a bowl of porridge forced into my lap, and the questions start. I tell them the truth, mainly. I want them to know that I have been safe the whole time I've been away. So I tell them about the fairy realm, about being trapped until the doorway opened again, that it was a beautiful place, and that I wasn't alone.

I even tell them a little about Thorn, although I leave out the part where it turns out he was the one trapping me there. I still can't process that. I expect some resistance, particularly from Papa, but he just nods throughout. When I get to the part about Mama's portrait, I understand why. She has told him this story, at least in part. Nanny similarly does not take much convincing, and I wager she has heard the story first hand before as well.

Beau and Hope are, oddly, my biggest sceptics, and I am only half-sure Beau believes me when I reach the end of my tale. He keeps saying, “That’s impossible!” over and over. Hope is quiet, impossible to read. I wonder how Honour will react when I see her.

“We’ll bring her over first thing tomorrow,” they twitter.

“Why can’t we just go over there now—”

“No!” say all the adults at once.

I blink at them.

“You should just rest today,” Nanny says. “Let’s not rush things.”

“And we wouldn’t want to shock your sister. Freedom will go over and break the news to her slowly.”

This is a trifle odd to me, as everyone is bound to be shocked, but perhaps they are trying to avoid taking me through the town, and all the prying questions that would come with such an undertaking. Or perhaps they don’t want me to leave the house just yet, which is understandable, given what happened the last time I left it.

Nevertheless, I long to see her. My heart is swollen with joy to see everyone else, but I am already craving the silence of my sister’s knowing mind. There are things I need to talk to her about, things I’ve been unable to tell anyone else.

Nanny makes dinner, but we all abandon it, too excited and overwhelmed and exhausted to eat. At first, we share stories –what has happened to everyone in the time that I’ve been gone– but then the conversation shimmers down. Beau shows me something he’s drawn while Hope gushes about her new favourite book. Nanny busies herself with tidying up, her face quietly streaming with tears.

Papa sits in his chair by the hearth, smoking his pipe, his gaze tight on me. It hasn’t moved since we met at the doorstep. There is a greyness in the rest of his skin, a dullness in his eyes. He looks almost ill. Yes, I tell myself. *You had to come home. You had to.*

Beau puts his head in my lap and fastens his arms around me. His fingers tangle into my clothes, and I wonder if he ever plans on letting go. “I’m so glad you’re home,” he whispers.

I kiss his hair, inhaling the smell of sunflowers and peppermint. “Me too, dearheart.”

*I am home, I am home, I am home.*





Rose races off through the meadow, not looking back as the grass whips her skin, snatching at her clothes. I watch helplessly as she reaches the stream and slides down the bank, tearing across the stones and up the other side, where she hits the ground with such force that she rolls over. She sprints with the same desperate abandon as she did that first day.

The gate snaps shut.

The minute she vanishes from view I feel a pain in my chest so intense it's like being torn asunder. It is so real, so physical, that I expect to see blood. It's like I've lost an arm, only the wound cuts deeper. I scream, and the voice of a monster rises from my throat. *Let me turn into the monster, I pray, let this all just fade away.* The monster could live without her, the monster wouldn't care.

The fairies join me seconds later. Ophelia is openly weeping, but Ariel is furious. Her tiny form pummels against my chest. I feel nothing.

"How could you! How. Could. You—" Her thumping gets weaker. Ophelia's sobs slowly subside. The agony inside me only increases. This is it. It's like the curse said. If my heart is broken, I will break. I am dying, actually dying.

Let it be quick.

For a second, I imagine I hear Rose's voice, calling out to me in desperation. I open my eyes, expecting to see her, but there is nothing but

fog. I am only imagining her, or perhaps she is my heaven, calling to me, if I deserve such a place.

“Did you hear that?” says Margaret. “She’s calling for you.”

*Why? Why? After everything?*

I sink to the floor.

“Thorn!” Ariel cries.

“I’m still here.”

“I’d hold on, if I were you,” Margaret advises. “I still believe that all is not yet lost.”

How can she even say that?

I pull myself to my feet. I don’t know how long it will take, but I know I need to see her again. One last time. I drag myself to the Hall of Mirrors, each step harder than the last, and collapse on the floor.

“Show me Rose.”

The mirror shows her walking through the wood, arm in arm with a young man with dark red hair almost the exact same shade as hers. Her brother. How has she been reunited with him already? Had he been out in the woods, still searching for her, after all this time? She’s smiling, burying herself in his shoulder.

She once walked with me like that...

She reaches their cottage, and observes two children in the garden. It is such a pretty little house, such a lovely garden. I can feel her fingerprints everywhere.

The children run to her, and she’s crying. Crying and calling their names, and kissing them, and clinging on to them in a way she never clung to me. Watching her with her father is even worse. The love pours out of them all.

She will never return, but she will be happy. I have done the right thing.

I hope she will remember me, fondly, affectionately. I hope the memories of us bring her nothing but joy. The last thing in the world I want is to be a source of her pain.

I watch her all day. I do not stop to eat, I have no stomach for food. I just need to see her, for as long as possible. Who knows how much longer the mirrors will last.

At last, she goes to bed. I can feel my own eyes drooping. I am exhausted from opening the gateway, exhausted from lack of food. Rose slips easily into her old bed, closing her eyes. Her sister crawls in with her

and squeezes her middle, frightened she'll vanish in the night. Her father, brother, nanny—all check in on her. She has no idea how much she is loved.

She has no idea how much I love her.

But I have been selfish, keeping her here, focusing on my pain. What of hers, what of her family's? They have clearly missed her immeasurably. I thought of them, in the early days, but I didn't really comprehend what her absence would mean to them. I didn't fully understand love.

Her life is better without me. I should resign myself to that idea. She should have let me die before, let Moya have her way, let the sickness carry me off. That would have been more merciful.

This is for the best. She will be happy now. And if she is happy, I must be too.

I just wish we could have been happy together.

"Thorn..."

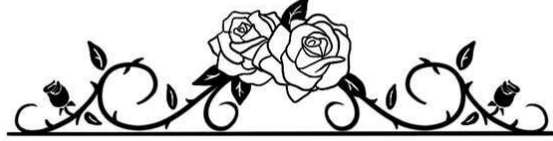
My ears prick up. It cannot be?

"*Thorn...*"

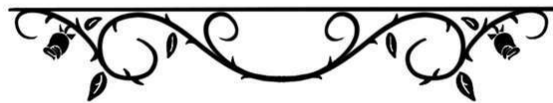
In the dim light of Rose's tiny bedroom, I see her hands curl around her necklace. I touch my own. It feels oddly warm.

She has every reason to hate me now, and yet she does not.

I feel Margaret's presence beside me. "There is still magic," she says, "and there is still hope. Hold on a little longer, my boy. She may surprise you yet."



## ROSE



The next morning, I awake to weak, warm light squirming through the flimsy curtains. The threadbare coverlet is twisted around me, bunched up around Hope, who sleeps soundlessly by my side, her arm still wrapped around my middle as if she was afraid I'd vanish in the night.

I lean down and kiss her cheek as I wriggle carefully out of the bed. I pull back the curtains, just a crack, slip into my slippers, and lower myself into my reading spot.

My slippers! I've been gone for over seven months, and yet no one had dared to remove them. In fact, the room of my childhood is utterly unchanged, apart from the spotless corner Honour used to inhabit. Perhaps Hope has different clothes strewn over the chair in the corner, and perhaps that is a new vase of dried flowers, but nothing else is different.

My old books are piled up exactly how I left them. They are weather-worn, and the paper smells unfamiliar. I thumb through the first one. A classic tale of mystery and adventure, a journey of self-discovery and impossible places. I set it quickly aside; the book is the same, but it doesn't provoke any wanderlust. Perhaps I have seen enough wonder these past few months.

Downstairs, Nanny gasps when she sees me, and Beau runs over to squeeze me, as though he was afraid I was a dream of yesterday. I pull him up and spin him around, which is no easy task. He is so much bigger than he was.

I pat Fifine and Azor and grab a bowl of porridge. The whole family trickles in, one by one, all bar Freedom, who is already out. It's a quiet meal, and everyone keeps staring at me.

"You're very brown, Rose," says Hope eventually.

"I've spent a lot of time in the sun. The gardens, Hope, they're so beautiful, if only—"

I stop, because Hope will never see the gardens, no matter how much I might wish it.

Spoons scrape bowls. Nanny remarks about the weather. Papa asks Hope what she has planned for today, quizzes Beau on his latest school work. I wish Freedom were here, even to annoy me.

Suddenly, I hear his voice. "You should slow down—"

"I can't believe you didn't come straight to me last night—"

"We didn't want to shock—"

"She is my sister, Freedom!"

*Honour.* Honour is here. I've barely managed to get out of my seat before the door is flung open and she is there, standing on the threshold, her eyes wide and her hair wild.

She takes one look at me and bursts into tears, and we are running towards each other, arms extended. We sink to the floor the second we are together, sob each other's names, and sit there on the floor until everyone else starts moving around us.

Nanny whips out a chair. "You really shouldn't sit on the floor, Honour love—"

"Here, take a pillow—"

"I'll get some tea!"

It is only when Honour has been properly sat down and everyone else has moved away that I see my sister fully for the first time, and realise what everyone is fussing about, something that should have been apparent the minute I clasped eyes on her.

Honour is very, very pregnant.



Everybody suddenly finds themselves something to do, and Honour and I are alone together for the first time in months. She wails that she's so sorry she got married without me. I gush that I'm so sorry I left her.

I can't believe she's going to have a baby—no wonder she was always knitting whenever I checked in with her. I wish I'd been there when she told everyone she was expecting. At least, I suppose, I will be here to support her now... although at what cost? I will not be there for Thorn.

I fill her in on where I've been, and she doesn't seem at all shocked or surprised.

"I knew you were alive," she says, beaming through her tears. "I just... felt it. The night before my wedding, I swear I almost heard you call to me, saying that you were all right and not to worry."

The night before her wedding. The night I wrote to her for the first time. Perhaps the magic of the castle could reach the outside after all.

"I'm not sure anyone believed me," she carries on. "Nanny and Papa wanted to, I think... Freedom never did, of course. He never listens."

"He's stubborn, like that," I mumble, knowing very well it's a trait we both share. Honour knows it too, and smiles knowingly at me.

"You look different," she says.

"As do you!"

She laughs, placing a hand on her massive belly. She must have conceived straight after the wedding; she cannot be any less than six months. I've seen full-term women with smaller bumps. The look suits her though, and she reminds me of Mama, all round and soft and devoid of sharp edges. She looks stronger than Mama ever did though, thankfully.

"I mean it." She regards me carefully. "Something's changed in you."

"I feel different," I tell her. "But I don't know why."

Honour tilts her head in that irritating, all-knowing way.

"I met someone," I conclude.

"Ah, yes, your mysterious companion. What was he like?"

I tell her the absolute truth, about who—or what—he is. Honour sits there in silence for a moment as I finish the description of Thorn I've omitted until now. She's not stunned, not shocked, just... silent.

Finally, she says, "But what is he *like*?"

Unfathomable relief washes over me. There is no judgement in my sister, not a sliver. Just pure understanding, unquestionable clarity. Honour indeed.

Talking about Thorn is difficult, but somehow, with her beside me, I manage it. "He is intelligent, witty, compassionate and kind... at least, I thought he was. I thought..." *I thought he was everything.* "I thought he was the most gentle soul that I had ever met." A lump rises in my throat. "But... he lied to me."

I tell her, with some difficulty, about terms of my entrapment and release. This makes her quieter for even longer.

"I see," she says, "and... how does that make you feel?"

"Furious," I whisper. "Betrayed. I never thought... there were always things he was keeping secret, but I had my secrets too. Not like this, though. I couldn't... I honestly couldn't believe he would do something like this. Even though I completely understand why."

Even just a day's perspective has given me that much. Of course he didn't want to be alone. Of course he wanted more time with me.

I wanted more time too.

But the deception eats into me: he should have told me, and trusted that I would not leave.

"And does it change the way you feel about him?"

It should. It did, in that moment. But already my old feelings are sliding back into place. I shake my head. "I think those are somewhat firmly fixed."

*But he kept you prisoner.*

Was I a prisoner? I did not feel like one. I was not treated like one. And... and I still cannot shake the feeling that there was another reason he didn't let me go. Ariel was trying to tell me something before Thorn sent her away.

"*There's more,*" she had said. What had she been prevented from revealing?

"Did you tell him, this gentleman of yours?" asks Honour. "How you felt about him?"

"He knows."

Honour groans, and her whole body seems to groan with her. "Oh, Rosie..."

"What?"

"You didn't tell him."

"I... I've told him lots of ways!" I argue. "I've told him that... that I like his face. And that... his soul is like mine! I... I assure you, I made my

feelings perfectly obvious.”

“I assure you sister, the poor boy probably thinks you’re just friends.”

I bite my lip. “You can’t know that.”

“No, but I do know you. You really aren’t... the easiest of people to read.”

“I... you’ve always found me easy to read!”

“I knew you before you had expressions. I’ve picked up on your subtle ways. But honestly, dearest sister, you are very good at keeping things locked up. You have been ever since...”

She doesn’t need to finish that sentence. We both know how it would end. And, as usual, of course, my sister is right.

Could Thorn honestly not have known I would have stayed, anyway? Did he honestly think, after all this time, that I didn’t care? That I would walk away without a single glance over my shoulder?

*But you did. You did exactly that.*

It’s only after Honour leaves that it hits me for the first time, hits me with such a force that I have to clutch the mantelpiece for fear of falling.

“Rose?” Hope asks, walking back into the room, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m never going to see him again!”

What have I done?





I wake up the next morning in front of the mirror, having fallen asleep beside it, still reaching for Rose. I am surprised to be alive, held on by some faint threads of hope, possibly, but I feel like a ghost nonetheless. My body is only half my own.

I can't eat. The food tastes of nothing. I feel like I'd retch up anything I forced down.

Bramble sticks to my side as I float into Rose's room, whining pitifully. I came here only once after Grace left, just to tidy up. It was quite therapeutic, putting her remnants away, clearing up that short interlude in my life.

There is no such comfort to be found now.

Grace left so little behind, but Rose's room has the eeriness of a tomb. Her unfinished things haunt me, the ghost of her life rattling around the chamber. She is in everything I touch, in all I behold, all I feel. Her scent still clings to the unmade bed, her warmth to her brush, her life and light to the half-finished book on the bedside.

It is like she will walk in at any moment.

A vase of roses wilts on her dresser. These, I think, I cannot leave. I go to sweep up the dead petals with my hands, but several of them slide into the half-open drawer. I tug it gently, hoping to scoop out the escapees.

The drawer is full of pressed flowers and neatly folded ribbons. It takes me a few seconds to realise what this drawer contains, until I recognise the

curled lace ribbon, wrapped around the smallest bouquet of snowdrops.

This is *my* drawer, the drawer of all the things I have given her, preserved as if they were precious heirlooms, wealthy trinkets. She hasn't thrown away one bud, a single frayed ribbon.

I take out everything one-by-one, trying to imagine her thoughts as she placed them in there. Right at the very back is a scrunched up ball of paper. It seems so out of place amongst the rest of the items that I first think she must have stashed it there accidentally, but I unroll it nevertheless.

*Dearest Thorn*, it reads.

I stop. This letter is addressed to me. When did she write it? Should I even be reading it? She never gave it to me for a reason—stuffed it away, for a reason.

But they are her words, her words to me, and I cannot help but want to cling to them.

Before she wrote 'dearest,' she wrote *dear*. I like her addition, like that she thought 'dear' too trivial. I am her dearest, her most. I know people use that expression often amongst family, but I choose to believe, in this moment, it was meant for a larger purpose.

*I did not ask to come here, but now, I cannot imagine my life taking another route. I don't think I want to go. No, I know I want to go home. I do, so badly, but I am not ready to say goodbye to you.*

*I don't think I'll ever be ready.*

She must have written this letter before the gateway opened the first time, when she thought she would be leaving. Before I nearly died. Before she gave up home to save me.

She didn't want to leave. She wasn't ready. Six months of my company and she wasn't ready.

There is only a little more of the letter. I am afraid to read the rest. I have so little left.

*In short, I cannot imagine my life without you.*

*You are the greatest friend—*

Her letter stops there. Was she interrupted? No, she had time to screw it up and shove it away. Something irked her about her words. Did she regret them? Did she wish to take them back? Why then, hide it? Why not dispose of it entirely?

I think, I hope, that her frustration was with not being able to finish, not being able to find the words to say goodbye.

She stopped writing after the word “friend”. Is it too much to hope that it was that word that infuriated her so? Did she realise that she could not sum me up in such a way?

I could never have squeezed her into such a description.

*Then come home. Somehow. If it's true, come home. To me, to us. To whatever you wish. Just come back.*

*Please Rose, please. Come home.*



I go back to watching her in the mirrors, getting as close to her as I can. She's been reunited with her sister, Honour, who's expecting a baby. Rose never mentioned anything before. Was this one of the reasons she wanted to return so badly? She would have missed the birth if she'd stayed another five months.

Grace died giving birth to Beau. It can't have been easy for her, if she knew. It can't be easy for Honour.

Perhaps she needs her sister more than I do.

Rose is resting against Honour's chest, and Honour is stroking her hair, long and slowly. Every so often the baby kicks, and Rose's face lights up in amazement. She grins at her sister, placing her hand to her bump. She is utterly mesmerised.

Another sharpness pings in my chest, because moments like that are beyond me forever.

The sisters stay like this for a long, long time. If they spoke about her time in the castle, if they spoke about me at all, it was before I started watching. Rose is silent now, contemplative.

I wonder what she's thinking. She's thinking deeply about something, I am sure, but her face is an utter mystery. How can I know someone so well and still have no clue what they are thinking half of the time? I know her likes and dislikes, her fears, a semblance of her desires. I know what kind

of person she is. But when her mind goes wandering, she is so far away from me. Her thoughts are an ocean, and I am stranded in a desert.

She said her soul was shaped like mine.

She believes that we are the same, that we are alike in the ways that matter. Nobody has ever said such a thing to me. Why was I so held up in my anger and frustration that I never truly considered the weight of those words?

“Are you all right, dearest?” Honour asks, still stroking Rose’s hair.

“I miss him,” Rose replies.

Is she talking about me? Hope flares in my chest, bright and brittle. Who else could she be talking about?

“I know, dearheart, I know.”

Rose buries herself in Honour’s chest, and says nothing more.



I watch her for the rest of the day, the fairies beside me, as if they expect me to fade away into a wisp of smoke if they do not keep me company. They try to force me to eat, but I can’t. Even Bramble, stalking my side, has little of an appetite. He’s pining too.

“I should have let him go with Rose.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” snips Margaret. “You deserve company, boy. You deserve far more than you’ve ever had.”

“Still,” I say, not sure if I believe her, “it doesn’t seem fair that he should have to suffer.”

“He’ll be fine,” Margaret insists, although she sounds dubious. I wonder if she’s remembering Raven. I wonder if she remembers his name.

I wonder what will happen to the three of them.

“Is there any way that you three could—”

“Stop,” says Ariel, “just stop.”

“Even if we could go, we wouldn’t,” Ophelia says quietly. “Isn’t that right, ladies?”

“Quite right,” says Margaret. “We’ve lived long lives, dear. Don’t you worry about us. Don’t you worry about anything.”

I turn back to the mirror. Rose has been silent most of the day, listening to others rather than talking herself. Honour has just departed, most of the family heading outside to see her off. Rose finds herself alone in the main room for a split moment.

Her face turns grey and pale, and for a short second, it looks like she might faint. She grabs hold of the mantelpiece just as Hope comes back in.

“Rose? What’s wrong?”

“I’m never going to see him again!”

It’s like she’s only just realised what has truly happened. I hold out my hand to the glass. It’s all right, Rose—

But it isn’t all right. It isn’t all right because she isn’t coming back, because I’m never going to see her before me in the flesh. I’m never going to hold her again in my arms, and we’re never going to be together.

“I told you she loved you,” Margaret says. “Hold on, my boy.”

*To what?*

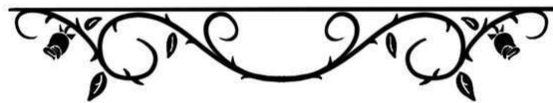
“The doorway will open again,” Ariel says, but her words sound more like a desperate, frantic plea, like someone begging death for a reprieve. “Just hold on until the next solstice!”

Five months without Rose? Even without a cursed, breakable heart, I’m not sure I could survive it.

“Sure,” I tell her, knowing that I’m lying. “I survived a couple of decades without her. A few months shouldn’t kill me, right?”



## ROSE



Try as I might, I'm sure my family can see my distress the following morning. I try to busy myself by helping Beau with his school work. Hope, of course, requires no such assistance. She's been smarter than I am for years.

Honour comes round for lunch. I offer to visit her tomorrow, but this idea is quickly rebuffed. Either no one wants me to leave the house ever again, or they're still trying to think of a plausible reason for my absence that doesn't sound so truly remarkable before all the villagers learn of my return.

After Honour departs for her abode in the mid-afternoon, I find myself alone. Hope and Beau are at school, Nanny has gone to the market. Freedom, I suspect, has gone hunting. He's clearly trying to avoid me, having barely spoken a word since our reunion. It makes me long for the days when he used to tease me and push me out of trees.

I wander into Papa's study. This is usually the forbidden room, but today the door is wide open, and I sense I am welcome anywhere right now.

"Ah, Rosebud." Papa's face flutters into his almost-smile, the nearest semblance of happiness he has managed since Mama's death.

I give him a hug which he gladly returns, and I stay there for a little longer than I planned to.

"I have a gift for you," he says.

"A gift?"

“It was for your birthday,” he says quietly. “It belonged to your mother. She wanted you to have it.”

He opens his top drawer and pulls out an old, weather-beaten package, thick and dusty.

“From Mama?”

“Yes.”

“Why me?”

“From your infancy, she had set aside gifts to give you all once you turned eighteen. Lord knows what I’ll do for Beau’s, poor boy. But this is most assuredly for you.”

Gingerly, I peel open the wrapping. It is, unsurprisingly, a book. *The Fey Collection*, I read, before opening the cover.

*My darling Rose,*

*You will know most of these stories already, but I have them here, written down for you, just in case. These are the stories of our ancestors. My mother gave this to me on my eighteenth birthday, and her mother gave it to her. Share these stories with your brothers and sisters, my little fairy. Be adventurous. Be afraid. Be brave. Above all, love fearlessly, for as long and hard as you can.*

*All the love in the world, Mama*

A lump wells in my throat. I know she did love fearlessly—right until the end.

I’m also intimately aware that I haven’t done the same.

*There’s nothing you can do now*, a voice reminds me. I know it’s right. I shake away my thoughts and turn to the first page of the book.

I’m familiar with the first few tales, particularly the one about the dark fairy, who the queen trapped at great cost.

There’s another story I’ve not heard before, at least not from my mother. It talks about the castle the evil fairy is trapped in, how her magic weakens it with every passing day. How one day, she may break free, and wreak havoc on the world once more. It says she’s guarded by a terrifying monster, but a neat line crosses through that part. Another hand has written over it, *‘the castle is protected by a beautiful creature.’* In the margin, in such clear writing, she has added, *‘He is not a monster!’*

Mama. She is talking about Thorn. I left him alone with this evil creature still prowling the walls.

I pray that he's safe. I curl my hands around my little amber rose, and hope that he can feel the warmth of me through his thorn pendant.

*I'm still with you, Thorn.*

He's still with me, too. I can't shake free of him. I don't think I want to.

There are other stories in the volume, ones Mama never got a chance to tell us. They are about what happened after the fairies fled their homeland, shed their wings and became human in almost every way. *These are the stories of your ancestors.*

Thorn was right. Mama was descended from the fey.

There is something else amongst the wrappings of the book, a tiny hand mirror of delicate design. At first, I am entirely confused as to why she would have included this in a gift to me, the least of her daughters to treasure such an item. Then I pick it up, feeling its heavy weightlessness, and notice the flawless etchings. This is a fairy mirror. She took it from the castle. I have seen so many like it.

Clutching it to my chest, I try not to cry. It is all I have left of that place.



For the next few days, I exist in some kind of dream. Nothing feels real, nothing feels right. It's akin to the numbness I felt after Mama's death. I am moving, but not breathing. I don't feel fully alive.

I try to put on a brave face for my family, eating and chatting with as much energy as I can muster. They must notice something amiss, but probably put it down to me trying to re-adjust to my old life. I make light of it, where I can, jokingly complaining about my narrow bed and lack of feathery pillows.

My family keeps me busy. Nanny always appears to be needing help with the laundry and the cooking, tasks I am more than willing to help with as they occupy my mind, and I'm worried I've grown idle living in such luxury. Hope and Beau always seem to need help with school work, even though Hope works out problems so quickly with just a little assistance from me, that it's quite clear her problems were invented. Honour visits whenever she can, which spares me from Freedom's



attempts to keep me busy—namely, assisting him with skinning his kills while he stares at me stonily.

“I’d prefer to model for you, if I have the option,” I tell him, which earns me a dirty rag in the face.

When I’m left alone, the thoughts come as quickly and darkly as a winter’s night. Thorn, alone in that castle, thinking I don’t care for him, thinking I’m gone for good. What can I do? Wait until the next solstice, and pray it opens in the same place? Do I have another option? What if I can wait, and it doesn’t open? Or even...

What if he can’t wait? What if I do go back, and Thorn is not there waiting for me?



The next day, I share the book with Honour. “Why do you think she gave it to me?” I ask.

Honour shrugs. “She left me her best linens for my eighteenth, and a set of exquisite spoons. Sometimes I think Mama knew that she was never going to live to see us grow up.”

She had not been well for a while before Beau came. It might have been logic, rather than instinct, but somehow, I am inclined to agree. Her note, her advice to live bravely, is the sort of thing one would write if they weren’t planning to say it in person. “Did she leave you a note too?”

Honour nods. “She told me that I was the most caring person she knew, but that I should look out for myself, and not be afraid of asking for things,” she smiles shyly. “I told Charles to dance with me the very next day.”

“I wonder what she told Freedom.”

“She told him that he would always look after us, that he would never fail us, and that he should be careful when shooting.”

I stare at her.

“She gave him a crossbow,” she adds, by way of explanation.

“How do you know what she told him?”

Honour looks down. “After you left—” she starts, but is interrupted by Freedom marching from the study out into the cool evening air. He looks at me darkly as he passes.

“Is Freedom angry with me?” I ask.

Honour wriggles uncomfortably. “Mad at himself, I fear.”

“How so?”

Honour sighs and re-adjusts her seat. I still can’t stop looking at her. She is so large. I’ve missed so much. I find it difficult to concentrate on her words, even when I’ve asked for them. “When you went missing, we were naturally all distraught, but Freed... he was out there in the forests every day, every hour, searching for you. That first week he barely ate or slept. One day, I found him in his room, clutching the note that mother had left him. He was just seething with rage. It... it almost got to the stage where I thought about trying to convince him that you were dead, that there was no point searching. But then he stopped of his own accord. I think he’s wishing he carried on.”

Except, he didn’t stop. He just started being more secretive about it. I had seen him in the mirror, walking the woods day after day. “It wasn’t his fault,” I mumble.

“Try telling him that,” Honour advises. “Because he’s not listening to anyone else right now.”



I step outside the house and find Freedom leaning against the wall. I know at once that he has heard the conversation. “I should have searched harder.”

“What part of *trapped in a fairy realm* don’t you understand?”

“I could have found you. If I’d been quick enough. If I’d realised you were missing—I could have found that stupid gateway and made it give you back to us.” His entire body shakes, but he does not meet my eyes. “You heard what Mama wrote to me. She said that I would always protect you, never let you down. But I did. I really, really did.”

“Freedom, no one is to blame for this but me.”

“But—”

“I am sorry for what I put you through. Don’t do this to yourself. I’m safe, I’m unhurt, I’m here.”

“I saw you, you know. A few weeks ago.”

“I... I know.”

“You were standing in this meadow, across the stream, flanked by fog. I thought you were a ghost or a vision... but I called out to you, and you called back. Why... why didn’t you come to me?”

“Thorn was hurt,” I answer. “I couldn’t let him—”

Freedom grabs me roughly and pulls me into his arms. “Don’t leave us again, Rose. Don’t you dare.”

I want to make some sort of joke, to tease him, to push him away and make light of it, but I don’t, I can’t. For a few, rare moments, I am just a girl who loves that her big brother loves her, and never, ever wants to leave him.

Except, of course, I do.

“I missed you,” I say, burying my face in his chest. “Also, I learnt to climb trees.”

At this, Freedom laughs. He holds me at arm’s length. “You did?”

“It’s a lot easier when your teacher doesn’t *push you out*.”

“You are never going to forgive me for that, are you?”

“I’m your little sister. I don’t have to forgive you for anything. That’s my speciality.”

“I thought that that was winding me up?”

“That too. I have lots of specialties. Also, I shot a wolf.”

“You did?” Freedom’s face breaks into a proud smile. “Well done! Did you—wait. What were you doing hunting wolves? I thought you said it was safe where you were?”

“It was... mostly.”

I think of the shadows, of Moya in the glass, which makes me worry about Thorn again.

“Mostly?” Freedom is not impressed. “What else was in that castle, Rose? Apart from your companion?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I say quickly, only to appease him. It matters now more than ever.



*I couldn't let him die.*

At the time when Thorn was hurt, I convinced myself that anyone would have done the same. Perhaps most people would. But what had Margaret said? She would have stayed... but not for the same reasons.

At the time, I didn't know what she meant, or ignored it if I did. But I understand now.

I did not stay to save his life. I stayed to save mine. Because I have no heart if his ceases to beat. No life without his. His death would have destroyed me, reduced me to a ruin of whoever I was before. I would have been a shell for the rest of my days.

I remember similar sentiments were expressed in Tromeo and Lessida, when they both realised the other was safe, but far beyond their reach. They admit—separately to themselves and not to each other—that this will do. That they can continue to live so long as the other one does. It will be enough.

This is why it's Thorn's favourite book. It's why Thorn let me go. He told himself that it would be enough, that I was alive and happy. He did not know that I would not be happy without him.

And Tromeo and Lessida find their way back to each other. Despite everything, despite years, despite wasted decades, they are reunited. They come back to one another.

I need to go back to Thorn. I just need to wait until the next solstice, and pray that it opens in the same place. I don't even know what I will say to him—

A sharp pain burns in my chest, so sudden and so strong that I cry out, clutching the bedpost to steady myself. Hope murmurs in her sleep, but doesn't wake.

As soon as it started, it's over.

What was that? I clutch the little fairy mirror, as if I can fall right through the glass and reach him.

*Be all right, I pray, I am here. I will come back soon...*

Knowing that sleep isn't coming easy tonight, I light a candle, conscious of not disturbing Hope, and begin to write.

*My Dearest Thorn,*

*I cannot stop thinking about how I left, and how I long to take back the way we ended things. I worry about you. I think of you constantly. I miss you, like one misses a part of their heart. It feels impossible that I can live without you.*

*I should be mad at you. Your deceptions cut me deeply, but your absence cuts me worse. I think I understand why you did what you did. You did not trust that I would stay with you anyway. I did not give you reason to trust me, and for that I am most sorry.*

*I never told you quite so plainly what you meant to me, even though I felt it so keenly it should have poured out of me.*

*You are my everything.*

*Please stay safe, until I can see you again.*

*All my love, Rose*

I fold the letter, take it to the window, and burn it with my candle. The blackened wisps float away on the breeze. Let them reach him, like my words reached Honour. Let him know that I am coming home.



When sleep comes, Grace meets me in the meadow again. The grass is grey and lifeless. The flowers turn to ashes when they graze against her skirts. She looks out over the stream.

"I used to walk to the meadow and imagine you standing here, where I am now," she says. "And now I am standing here, imagining my family."

I stand by her side, unsure of what to say. I realise I am in my beast form. The one I was always meant to die in.

"I know why you let her go," she says, "but you were wrong."

"You didn't try to stop me."

"You would not have listened. You were past listening." She turns to me, her eyes alight with venom. She looks more like Rose than ever. "You fool! She loves you, you know. She loves you."

"Then why didn't she say it?"

"Because she's *afraid*!"

"Of what?"

"Of everything. Of the impossible weight of letting herself love someone."

"You can't know that."

"Yes," says Grace quietly, "I can."

She clicks her fingers, and I am standing in Rose's childhood bedroom. Honour and Hope are asleep on one of the beds, Freedom on another. Rose is lying against him, but her eyes are wide awake. Frost gnaws at the pain.

She's no older than ten.

"What's... what's this?" I turn to Grace.

Grace looks at the faces of her sleeping children, but there's little softness in her expression. "A memory," she says. "One I wanted her to share with you, because she has shared it with no one."

"What—"

"Hush," she says. "It'll happen soon."

The sound of something mewling echoes down the corridor. A baby. Rose's face lights up, and she rushes from the bed, streaming out of the room and streaking across the landing. She stops shortly in front of her parents' door.

Grace is lying on the bed, but it is awash with blood. A tiny infant is wrapped up in the nanny's arms, howling at the top of his lungs. Everyone else is deathly quiet.

Rose stands there, struck still. For an age, no one moves except for Beau.

Until Grace notices her daughter standing at the threshold. She holds out her hands, slick with blood.

"Don't be afraid, Rose. Don't be frightened. Be brave, my dearheart. Be brave."

Someone closes the door in Rose's face.

Before I have a chance to react to what I have just seen, the cottage is swirling. We are still on the landing, but it's another night. Grace's coffin is laid out in the dining room, candles burning around her. Rose's father is weeping over her body, pulling at her curls.

And Rose is watching.

Another night, and he's staring at her empty chair, sobbing like a child.

And Rose is still watching.

For months, years afterwards, she watches him. Even when he no longer cries, she watches his gaze as he searches for his wife in a room she no longer inhabits, and never will again.

At one point, Honour reads them all a bedtime story. Beau is older now. He asks questions about love.

"I am never going to fall in love," Rose whispers, unnoticed by anyone.

Anyone but Grace, still watching her children. She never left them. Not once.

We whirl back to the meadow.

“Do you understand now?” Grace asks, not meeting my eyes.

“Yes,” I say, “I think so.” I think of Rose, who understood love far more than I gave her credit for, who watched it almost destroy her father and decided that to survive this world, she needed to stay away from it.

I’m sorry, Rose. I had no idea.

“Please,” Grace implores, “hold on for her. She’s almost ready.”

“I... I can’t last until the solstice. There’s no way—”

“Then hold on as long as you can.” She turns to face me. “Please. Don’t leave her alone in the world. She is coming for you, Thorn, hold on.”



Grace’s words lose a fragment of their meaning when I wake the following day, but I trace the shape of them, willing myself to believe not just in love, but in miracles.

I manage to eat a little, but not much.

Bramble isn’t eating, either.

We walk together in the gardens. The leaves have fallen, and even the piles seemed sucked of colour. The birds have gone. Everything is still and silent.

It can’t last until the solstice, can it? We can’t last that long.

I wander to the corner of the grounds where I buried Raven, and ruffle Bramble’s head. “You need to eat,” I tell him.

He groans.

“She’ll be even more mad at me if I can’t even look after you.”

We return to the castle. The mirrors aren’t working as well as they once were, dark and flickering. I remember this from before. I didn’t think it would happen so soon, but I suppose the gardens were already dying, thanks to my dallying.

Yet another poor decision, on my behalf.

I really should have told her the truth.

Too late, now.

There is a sharp crack and Ariel appears beside me with a stack of letters.



“Rose wrote these to her sister,” she says shortly. “Sometimes she’d throw them on the fire—to send them, I think—but since there was no way for me to send them, I saved them instead.”

“Ariel!” I chide. “Those were private—”

“I was curious. Sue me,” she says tersely. “I... I didn’t read them, though. I thought you should.”

“I can’t—”

“You’ll be dead in a few days. What have you got to lose?” she lets her words hang in the air for a moment, lets the sting settle in. “You might gain something.”

I stare at the letters for a long while after she leaves, before taking them back to Rose’s room. I fool myself into thinking I’m respecting her privacy, but I think perhaps I am merely saving them for the end.

Let hers be the last words I ever read.



Time loses its fixed definition, and a day, or two, or three later, I lie in front of the remains of the Mirror of Truth. The fairies swept up the shards and fixed the larger parts back into place, enough that I can see their faces, faint and indistinct though they are. A dozen pairs of eyes stare down at me.

I cannot see Rose any more.

The fairies are likely to fade soon, too. Back into the walls. My fault, my fault entirely.

“I am truly sorry,” I say to them.

“There’s no need to be sorry,” says Margaret, her voice softer than I have ever heard it. “It couldn’t be helped. You tried.”

“Couldn’t be helped?” The fury in Ariel’s voice is palpable. “You should not have let her go!”

“I had to. I should have tried to long ago. It was selfish of me to keep her here.”

“I do not think she minded,” Ophelia offers quietly.

“She was happy to leave.”

“That is not what I saw,” Ariel persists. “I saw you practically throw her out! Didn’t even let us say goodbye—”

“You would have stopped her.”

“I would have told her the truth! Do you think she would have left if she knew why you hadn’t let her go—”

“She might have.”

The fairies go quiet.

“Oh, my dear boy,” says Margaret softly, and a hundred hands reach out towards me. “You actually still fear that, don’t you? Even after everything?”

“If she stayed, it would not have been for the right reasons.”

“I don’t know,” adds Ophelia, smiling weakly, “she was very reluctant to go, even after you told her that you were keeping her here. I am sure she’ll be back, if... if you can wait.”

I shake my head. “I watched her reunite with her family. She will not return. This is as it should be.”

“This is not as it should be!” Ariel hisses venomously. “How could you just—she should be here! You need her and she—”

“Ariel, calm down. There’s nothing to be done now.”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice cracks. A dozen tears slide into shards. “I just... I really liked her, and I like *here*, and I like the idea of having a body again, and I like you. This isn’t fair!”

“We’re still here,” says Ophelia hopefully. “For now, at least. It isn’t over yet.”

Something stabs against my chest, like another piece of me falling away. “Yes, it is.”

A dozen hands reach out to touch my shoulder, a dozen faces etched with sorrow. The reflections flicker, dimming like firelight.

“You... might...”

“Ariel?” The reflections are fading. Panic pulses in my chest. “No—”

“It’s... right... here... still... won’t... leave...”

“Margaret! Ophelia!”

Then they are gone, and I am alone once more.

For a moment, I think I hear something, a banging, a tapping against the glass. I turn towards the Mirror of Moments. Somehow, Rose’s image is imprinted there, stained with some commingling of panic and despair. A vision conjured by my dying heart. The magic faded earlier.

“Rose,” I whisper, “I know I am only imagining you, but will you stay, regardless?”

She nods faintly, although her reflection is already darkening. She mouths something—I just catch the word *forever*.

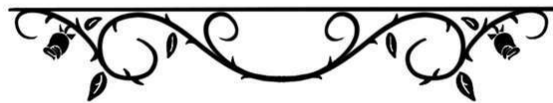
She is gone a second later. Forever is not long, for an echo. Not long for a human.

I turn towards the covered glass. It hums, as if alive.

“You can come now, Moya,” I say. “There is nothing left for you to destroy.”



## ROSE



I wake from an awful dream of Thorn in the Hall of Mirrors, the fairies fading from view. In the dream, he begged me to stay with him. I told him I would stay forever.

I don't think he heard.

I don't think it was a dream, either.

I make my way downstairs for breakfast, my chest still aching. Everyone is smiling and chatting, but I'm not. I can't.

Every mealtime when we come together, I sit with my family, watch them talk and laugh and talk and laugh with them, but only in the way a puppeteer moves a puppet. I'm frightfully, inexplicably, impossibly lonely. I can't understand it. I like solitude. I like stillness and quiet. I like the way the rest of the world melts away whenever I dream.

But the world is more present than ever. I can't make it stop or stand still, and I have lost the ability to take pleasure in the things I once loved to do.

I want to cry out. I want to tell anyone who will listen that I feel lost and filled with sorrow, but I can't. I can't hurt them, and they won't understand.

Thorn would. Not a thing I had kept from him, not a thought or secret. Was this simply because there had been no one else around?

No. No, I had never been one to divulge thoughts easily, not before.

Life before Thorn. I look around the home of my childhood. I was happy here, wondrously happy. These walls contain the scars of my life, but a haze surrounds them. Life before Thorn does not seem to exist.

*Not a thing had I kept from him.*

There was one thing. And, in the end, it was the only thing that mattered.



The next day, I declare my intention of going for a walk. As I expect, this declaration is met with stony looks and pale faces. I'm getting ready for an argument when Nanny says, "Well, you can't stay inside forever!" and turns to my father to have a discussion about mentioning my return off-handedly to the neighbours.

Freedom looks like I've stabbed him. Beau pulls at my elbow. "Can we come?" he asks.

I want so desperately for a few minutes to myself, but it is hard to refuse that little face. I agree readily, which appeases Freedom somewhat. He insists he come as well, but walks several feet behind us the entire way. The dogs are better conversationalists.

We're gone for several hours. Beau keeps us entertained by spouting off all the new names he's learnt for things. Hope fills me in on the latest stories I might have missed. I, however, am unusually silent. When I walked with them before, I would fill their heads with fairy tales, but this is now a forbidden word amongst us.

The walk back takes us within distance of the meadow. Beau wanders on ahead, chasing a toad I think, whilst I pause, my eyes fixated on the bank of green beyond the stream. A touch of fog, thin as frost, brushes the damp grass.

Somewhere, behind, between, close by, Thorn is. He is there, and I am here, and the space between us might as well be an ocean.

"That's where it is, isn't it?" Hope stops at my shoulder. "The gateway that took you. Across the stream."

"Yes," I reply, not knowing what else she expects me to say.

"Did you miss us, while you were gone?"

I turn to face her. How can she ask me that? “I thought about you almost every single day.”

“So why are you thinking of going back?”

I startle. Hope is fourteen. When I left, she was more of a bookworm than I was. She detested parties, abhorred crowds, hated looking people in the eye. When did she become so observant? Her expression is as clear as glass, the pain, the fear, the disappointment, the honesty and the clarity. I cannot lie to her.

“I love you, you know that, right?”

She nods, although she looks a little surprised. “I assumed so. You don’t say it much.”

“No,” I admit, “I suppose I don’t. But I think it all the time, and more than ever when I was away. But there is this beautiful thing about families. Even when we’re apart, we’re still as close as ever. Our families are a part of us.”

“Like Mama,” she says. “How she’s still with us, even though she’s not.”

“Yes,” I say, even though I have not felt that way, not until recently. “The point is, Hope, family is easy to carry around. If we’re lucky, we meet other people in life who become a part of us too. But... they are not so easily carted around. The bonds between us are just as strong, but when we are apart, those stretched bonds begin to hurt, and we feel like we will break if we cannot return to them.” I point out towards the meadow. “Somewhere out there, somebody is waiting for me to return, hurting just as much as I am now.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m sorry?”

“How do you know that they feel the same way?”

How do I know? Thorn has always been more open with his feelings than I have, but he has never expressed himself explicitly... and yet, he has. In every word and gesture he has cast in my direction, for almost every day. I know him better than I know myself.

“It sounds impossible, but... his heart speaks a language that mine can understand, more precisely and more perfectly than any words.”

“So... he hasn’t told you?”

I almost want to laugh. “He didn’t have to.”

But I should have told him. I really, really should have. I don't tell Hope this. Instead, I put my arm around her, ask her to keep my secret, and feel a little better for sharing it.

\*\*\*

When we return, Nanny greets us at the back door, her face white and taut. For a second, panic floods me. Papa's been taken ill. Honour is having the baby. Something is wrong, something awful—

"You have a visitor, dear," she says uneasily, and steps away to reveal James Saintclair standing in the kitchen.

Nanny quickly steers the others away, and I am left alone with him.

This is one reunion I have not been looking forward to. I've not been fair to James. He's never acknowledged it, perhaps is even unaware of it, but I did not treat him as I should have done. I knew he liked me, I kissed him knowing that, and I never discouraged his affections even when I knew I didn't feel the same. I knew I would never love him, and that was safer. He could never hurt me. That was wrong of me, but I didn't know better.

I know so much more than I did then.

"Er, hello," he says, awkwardly stepping towards me with a slightly dazzled look of stark bewilderment. "I... I heard you were back. They're saying... well, it's a strange tale—"

"That it is," I nod.

"You're all right, though?"

A fondness stirs within me. James has always been so kind. No wonder he was one of the few I considered a friend. No wonder he was easy to play pretend with.

"I'm fine," I reply, taking a seat. "It was not a difficult place to be trapped in."

"I'm... I'm glad," he says. He moves towards a stool, but doesn't sit. He wrings his fingers. "I'm glad that you weren't scared, that you were safe. Your family missed you terribly."

I notice he does not include himself in his number, and something in my face must show it.

"I... I missed you too," he says quickly. "Although..."

"James?"

He looks down at his palms, wiping them together, tapping his fingers against the table. His eyes look everywhere but at me. "I... I told Delphine

Bardot that I would marry her,” he spits out eventually.

“Delly?” I don’t think I’ve ever seen them together, and it takes my mind a little time to imagine it. But the more time I spend on the image, the more I see it clearly. Delly, polite, sweet, lovely Delly from the bakery. They will make a splendid couple. “Well, well done Delly! Well done *you*.”

James stops trembling. His eyes stop darting about. “You aren’t... you aren’t put out? I know that there was never a formal arrangement between us, but—”

“No, James, not at all. I am delighted for you both.”

He breathes a sigh of relief. “I would have waited, if I’d known,” he adds, more out of politeness, I think. Then he stiffens. “No... I think, once I spoke to her—once I knew her—that I might have been stolen from your affections even if you were right by my side. That sounds awful, I know, and I’m terribly sorry—”

“You love her.”

James’ face breaks into the first real smile I’ve seen in a long time. “Yes,” he says proudly. “A great deal.”

“We would never have made a good match,” I tell him.

“No,” agrees James, “I don’t think we would have been precisely miserable together, but—”

“We would not have been entirely happy, either.”

“Exactly.” At last, he comes towards me, holding out his arms. He squeezes my hands and places the lightest kiss on my cheek. “It really is good to see you, Rose,” he says, beaming.

He pats my hand, says his farewell, and departs for Delly’s.

It is easy to wish him well.



That evening, after everyone else has gone to bed, I stay up with my father, staring into the fire as he thumbs through his newspaper. I sit on the hearth with the dogs, near his feet, the position I occupied as a child.

“Papa...” I start, “Do you ever regret marrying Mama?”



Papa folds down his newspaper and stares at me incredulously. "Why on earth would you ask that?"

"Because I know just how much it hurt you when she died."

"It did," he says, a whole lot of emotion tied up in those two words. "But she left behind five precious jewels that helped plug up the wound."

"But... what if you didn't have us?" I probe. "What if you'd married her, and she'd died within the year? If there were no children? Nothing to remember her by? Would you have regretted it then?"

"No." He says. How can he speak so simply?

"No? But you wouldn't have had anyone—"

"I would have had her," he continues. "And I would have taken a day with her over a lifetime with anyone else. And we had more than a day. We had years. If I have to live another ten, twenty, thirty years without her... it would still have been worth it."

My throat feels very tight. Papa reaches out, touches my hand.

"There are so many awful things in this world, my dear. And yes, death is one of them. But love is the only thing that makes any of the darkness worthwhile."

I rest my head against his knee so that he cannot see my tears.

"Why do you ask this now, Rosebud? Afraid you've missed your chance with Mr Saintclair?" He strokes my hair. Silence drifts by. He knows that that is not the reason. "If there ever was such a fellow, that you felt that way for... that you felt you had to be with, no matter what... you should know that whatever makes you happy, will make me happy."

For a long time, I cannot speak. It is only after the candles are nearly all burnt out that find my voice again, wiping my eyes on my sleeve. "Thank you, Papa."

I climb up the stairs and pick up Mama's book. I understand what she wrote, what she said to me the day she died. Don't be afraid. Live fearlessly.

I have not been living fearlessly. I have been living in fear, terrified at the thought of letting anyone get close for the fear they would be taken from me. Did Mama know this? Is that what she meant, when she spoke to me that last time? Had she known, all along, the path my life was to take?

The mirrors could not see the future, but perhaps... perhaps Mama could. Perhaps that was her power all along. I wonder if I have one, too.

I turn to the hand mirror, tiny blackened little glass that it is. I wonder if Thorn is watching me through his. I wish I could see him, so badly.

“Thorn,” I whisper, “I want to come home to you. I’m not afraid anymore. I’m not afraid of anything apart from never seeing you again. Let me come back. Let me find a way to you.”

For the merest of seconds, I swear I can see Thorn in the glass, looking back at me in utter disbelief, but after the moment has passed, I know I must have imagined it. Thorn has never been so thin. Am I already forgetting what he looks like?

*Soon, my dearest. Soon.*



I stumble down to Rose's room and pull myself up onto the bed. The faint traces of her scent linger there. Bramble climbs up with me and lies down by my side. My hands glide along the pillow to where I left her letters.

There are no other voices, no other sounds.

No point in being timid, in being polite. If there ever was any point in the first place.

*I cannot have you. But I will have your words.*

I begin with the first one, dated a few weeks after her arrival. This one is mostly about her family, about how much she misses them but wants them not to worry. Towards the end of the letter, however, she mentions me.

*I also appear to have made a friend. I know, me, a friend! I suppose everyone has thought my quota of those filled for years? I thought so too. He is as much a prisoner here as I am—more so, perhaps, for he has never left—and there is a loneliness inside him that he hides as well as I hid mine. We share a love of literature, although not always of the same tastes, and he makes me laugh. You know precious few have managed to do that.*

It is a little thing, our matching loneliness, our shared love. But it hints at our kindred spirits. I carry on reading. In every letter, she speaks of me. Sometimes just in passing, sometimes in a story—a funny thing I did or

said, an idea I had. My presence becomes more and more the topic of conversation, the focus of her writing.

*Dear Honour,*

*Thorn and I are becoming quite close. I feel no apprehension in telling you that I consider him the best friend I have ever had—apart from you, of course, dear sister. There is an ease I feel with him that I have never really felt with anyone else. A quiet, comfortableness to his presence. A part of this closeness is, to be sure, manufactured by our shared confinement. But much of it cannot be explained so bluntly. Had I been trapped here with that weasel Jean Dupont, for instance, I can guarantee I would not have grown so fond of him as I have of Thorn.*

*Dear Honour,*

*I tried to get Thorn to paint today. I say ‘try’ but I feel like he actually succeeded in the task. He is so very good with colour, and my room now plays home to his first piece: it is a beautiful explosion of red and pink hues. It reminds me of roses and raspberries and summer sunsets. He did not seem so fond of it as I did, he still seems to view his efforts through the eyes of mythical other people he has never met. I wish he could see the beauty of his work through my eyes. I wish he could see how beautiful he really is.*

*Then things became... strange. He said he wanted to kiss me. Obviously the two of us are built so differently I am not sure we would have much success in this department, but if I am completely honest... I wanted to kiss him. Or I wanted to tell him that I would let him, if we were the same. But I didn’t say that. I didn’t want him to think that I don’t think of him as human... or that I think of him as any less than whatever I am. What is happening to us?*

*I pause in my reading, brushing errant tears away. Oh Rose, why didn’t you say anything? The thought that she wanted to kiss me too swells up inside of me. She had thought of it. We were more than friends, if I needed any more proof.*

*Dear Honour,*

*Today, Thorn tried to teach me how to swim! I was utterly awful and spent most of it clinging onto his arms. I felt a little like a helpless damsel, and he the hero sent to rescue me... it is a silly thought, I know. I have never been one to play the princess! Do you remember how, once when we were children, Freed and I were playing a game and I asked him why I*

*couldn't be the one to rescue him? He told me only girls needed rescuing so I smacked him in the face with my wooden sword and gave him a bloody nose and told him to rescue himself from that.*

*But Thorn doesn't make me feel helpless. I will admit... I liked being there, so close to him. It is the most comfortable place on earth. But it's strange, too. No other person has the ability to make me feel so much by doing so little. He makes me feel like the saviour and the saved.*

*I think I know what this feeling is, but I'm afraid to speak it.*

*Dear Honour,*

*Last night, the strangest thing occurred. Thorn asked me to marry him, completely out of the blue. Is he... is he in love with me? He didn't say that he was, but... it was implied, wasn't it?*

*I turned him down. I cannot stay, after all. But there was a fraction of a second when I considered it. No one else could render me so indecisive. If James had asked, I would have turned him down. I would have felt sorry for him, but not for myself. But with Thorn...*

*I cannot imagine meeting anyone else as interesting as he is. I cannot imagine liking any one more. If things were different, if he were a boy from down the street...*

*But things are not different, are they? And I cannot imagine Thorn as anyone other than himself.*

*Dear Honour,*

*I worry about what will happen to Thorn when I go home. I worry about it so much that sometimes it keeps me up at night, with a sickness churning in my belly. It cuts into me, the thought of him here on his own. At least... at least he seems to have the fairies again now. But if they fade again, he'll be back to having no one. I can't bear it.*

*It's not as simple as guilt. It's almost as if I can already feel what he will feel. I have never cared about anyone this way. I am not like you. But I feel Thorn's pain like it is my own. It is monstrously, desperately unfair that he has been denied the freedoms we all take for granted. I do not want him to be alone again. I do not want him taken from my side.*

*Dear Honour,*

*I am beginning to worry that I will not have the strength to return to you all when the time comes. I just can't imagine standing in the meadow, watching Thorn be swallowed up by the mist, and knowing we shall never meet again. The two of us are connected by some strange, invisible bond. I*

*feel that once we are separated, that bond will snap as surely as bone, only nothing shall mend it again. I shall not be able to bear it! He is my heart, and I can no sooner carve him out of me than I could carve out my own.*

Why didn't she say this to me? I could have written her words myself, about her. The snap inside my chest was as real as any wound, yet her words offer a salve to the wound, soothing the pain, just a little.

*Dear Honour,*

*I had the strangest dream last night. I dreamt I was swimming in the lake with Thorn, only he was human. Somehow I knew that it was him, and for that moment, in the dream, everything was perfect.*

*He kissed me. I kissed him back. It was honey and heaven and starlight. A divine fire spread through me and I felt in that moment I could have melted away into nothingness, a beautiful, utter nothingness.*

*Oh Honour, what am I to do?*

This... this dream. I had it too, or one near enough like it. Is it possible that it could be the same dream? I remember the realness, the warmth... the feel of her skin on mine.

The last letter is dated only a few days before her departure. Her penmanship is frantic, scrawled and blurred, written in a frenzy.

*Honour, I am in agony. I am being torn in two. I miss you all so terribly, but I want to be with Thorn so much. It feels like I am dying. But being with him is not enough. It will never be enough. I want, I want...*

And then, there it is. The confirmation, dreaded and desired in equal measure:

*I wish he were fully human. I wish our bodies were as mirrored as our minds. I could bear the agony of losing you, my dearest family, if it meant having him completely.*

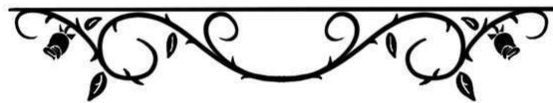
She wanted me. She may have preferred me human, and perhaps, therefore, it might never have been enough, but she wanted me.

I misunderstood entirely. The garden didn't start to wilt because her affections were dying, but because she was in turmoil. She wanted me but feared it could never be.

But she is still not coming back.



## ROSE



**M**y heart feels heavy when I wake. Heavy and tight and painful. I dreamt of Thorn again, Thorn sitting in my room with Bramble at his feet, looking gaunt and grey, a plate of untouched food at his side. Is he ill?

*Some of your dreams are just dreams... some a little more than that.*

The castle is still trying to speak to me, and I am listening. I have to go back, I have to go back *now*.

Straight after breakfast, I march over to Honour's with very little but a casual word to the rest of my family. The villagers stare at me as I walk by, turning to gossip with their companions. No one is brave enough to speak to me.

Charles is the perfect picture of politeness when I arrive at his front door, but even he watches me cautiously, as if he expects me to disappear into smoke. Honour has to dismiss him with claims that he is making her nervous, which is not good for the baby.

The minute he is gone, I unload my bag. It is full of every fairy tale volume I could find in our house.

"What's all this?" asks Honour.

"Research," I declare. "I want to find a way to open the gateway early. I cannot wait another four or five months. I need to return to Thorn now."

Honour's smile radiates. "Because you love him," she says.

"Yes," I admit. I might as well get used to saying it.

Honour claps her hands gleefully. “Oh, hurrah! I’m so pleased.” She pushes the books aside. “You won’t need these.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because you have true love on your side!” she says. “That will conquer any spell.”

“It cannot be that easy.”

Honour pouts. “True love isn’t easy...”

“So your advice is to go back to the gate, and ask it to open nicely?”

“Have you tried that?”

“No—”

“Well, then! Off you go!” She half-pushes me towards the door, but then her arms fall away. A hand drops to her middle, and she breathes strangely. Her face goes white.

“Honour?”

“On second thought, could you just wait a while? And... and ask Charles to fetch Nanny. I think the baby is coming.”



I relay Honour’s message to Charles and help Honour into bed.

“You can’t be having the baby,” I stammer. *It’s too soon. It’s too soon and I have to go.* “It’s too early.”

Honour looks down. “No,” she wheezes. “It isn’t.”

“But... but... you’ve... you’ve not been married nine months!”

The shame in her face reddens. “Charles and I—”

“Honour,” I say, halfway between appalled and delighted, “You didn’t.”

“We did,” she says. “That’s why we couldn’t wait for—”

She doubles over, gripping the side of the bed, letting out a long, painful moan. I rub her back gently, uttering words I hope are soothing and half wishing this was just a wound, something I could fix.

But there’s nothing I can do.

It’s a relief when Nanny arrives, a picture of cool, calm serenity. She sends me to boil water while she unpacks linens. “First babies always take a while,” she tells me matter-of-factly. “I’m sure it’s in no rush.”



But I really, really need this baby to rush. The need to return to Thorn is consuming. I can picture him the ruined garden, picture him gaunt and grey, sure that I've deserted him forever.

Never, never, never...

A few more hours tick painfully by. The baby still isn't here. I go outside to catch some air. Charles is pacing the garden, Papa sitting on a bench nearby, smoking a pipe with some irregularity. His knuckles are as white as Charles' face.

"It's taking a long time."

"She'll be fine, boy."

"Is it supposed to take this long?"

"Rose!" Honour screams for my return. Her voice cuts through me like ice. But for a minute, it is another voice that I imagine, calling out to me in pain.

The clock ticks. The sun shifts. I am still here.

Honour begins to push and strain. I boil endless pots of water, ferry all the towels I can find upstairs, grab the scissors.

"I might need your help, Rose," Nanny says. "Stay close to me."

Nanny hasn't attended a birth since Beau's. No wonder she is worried. Honour looks terrible. Her face is contorted into a horrible, ghastly shape. She looks like she's breaking apart. She holds my hand with such ferocity that I could not leave if I wanted to. I am a rabbit in a snare.

"If anything happens to me," she begs, panting, "you'll be there for my baby, right?"

I feel the blood rush from my face. My heart tightens. Not just with the thought of losing my sister, but the thought of making this promise. I cannot stay. Even if something happens. Even to look after this child. I cannot stay. I cannot.

Honour looks panicked. "Rose!"

"You're going to be fine, Honour."

"But if—"

"Your baby will be loved. Loved by everyone in their life. But most especially by you."

This seems to give her some ease, and she asks no more from me, whilst I offer silent prayers to anyone who might be listening.



The baby still isn't here yet. It's mid-afternoon. How many hours are left till sunset? I shudder to think.

*I'm coming, I'm coming, wait for me!*

I nip out of the room to tell everyone that she is doing fine, even though I have no idea what that even means. Nanny just told me to say it. Beau and Hope have now arrived. Everyone is white-faced. They bolt upwards the minute I open the back door.

"Is she—"

"She's all right. No baby just yet. Nanny doesn't think it will be much longer."

Beau's voice is very quiet. "Is she going to die?"

"No, sweetheart, she's doing splendidly."

I wonder when Nanny and the midwife knew Mama wasn't going to live through Beau's birth. It was always a risky pregnancy, they said, Mama not being well beforehand. I do not think the birth took long. Mama had been fine all day, laughing and chatting. It was only towards the end she felt the baby coming. By morning, he was here, and she wasn't.

She lived long enough to name him, hold him, kiss his face and hands and feet. Nanny said—because Papa couldn't—that she poured a lot of love into his tiny body in the fraction of moments she had with him.

I seize both of my siblings in my arms and kiss them forcefully. Neither one recoils, struggles, or wipes away my kisses.

"What was that for?" Beau asks.

"Because I love you both very much, and I need you to know that."

They stare at me solidly for quite some time. Have I scared them?

"We love you too, Rose," Hope says. "Please—"

There is a scream so loud from upstairs that it shakes the birds from the trees. I race back into the house, and for a moment, I forget the dying of the sun.



Days bleed together in an indistinguishable mesh. I am only half-conscious of a change in light. Colour has vanished completely from these walls. Colour, and sound. All has been replaced with a stiffeningly grey silence.

Even Bramble has gone silent, too. He barely moves, doesn't eat even when I try to. I wonder if I'm going to have to watch him die, or if I will go before him.

*Please, please don't make me watch. Not that, not again.*

I wonder which one of us will be dying alone?

I lean against his back and count the beats of his heart, terrified that soon it will be his last. I cannot bear it. I wrap my arms around his neck and cry into his fur.

"Please," I call out to the fairies, "if you have any way of sparing him, please do it."

A while later, there is the faint tingling of bells. I feel his fur slide away beneath my fingertips, replaced instead with hard stone. He is utterly still.

I assume it's reversible, but will not work on a creature like me. Or perhaps not for long enough.

The solstice is too far away. I will never make it.

Will she truly come again? In a few months, will the gateway open at her behest, and will she creep back into this tomb she once called her home?

What will remain of me, by then? A pile of bones with a rose-shaped stone in my chest? Or something less pleasant?

I don't want to hurt her.

I still want her to come.

Sometimes, when I sleep, I dream of her. I dream she finds me in the gardens and wakes me with a kiss.

Sometimes, I dream she's screaming, forbidding me to die.

Other nights, I dream she's writing to me, like she's a soldier left for war. Her letters are filled with promises of coming home.

*Home, home, home.*

I've been sleeping in her bed so long that it no longer smells of her. There's so little of her anywhere, and now even Bramble is gone.

I pull myself out of the bed. I feel hollow, like there is nothing left of me but this dense, cold pain at my centre. If I was ever whole, I have long since forgotten it.

I need to be close to some part of her. There has to be something left to cling onto.

I climb up the steps towards the roof garden, each step draining more and more of my strength. I can do this. I have to. If it's a struggle to breathe, it just serves as a reminder that I'm not dead, not yet.

Finally, the terrace appears. I pull myself onto the floor and lie there, gathering what remains of my breath. Through a narrow gap in the slanted roofs, I can just make out the meadow. Somewhere, beyond, there *she* is.

The sky overhead darkens. There is so little daylight left. Why isn't she here yet? My dreams and my reality have become so muddled; didn't she promise me she would come?

One single red rose remains on the bush above me. I reach out to grab it. The stem is so brittle that it breaks easily in my hand. I hold it to my chest. If I cannot have her beside me as I go, this will do. It will have to.

The pain in my chest is absolute. It spreads through me like wildfire. I am burning, my muscles collapsing, disintegrating, every sinew of me is torn apart. Every touch, every glance, everything she ever said, it all vanishes. It means nothing. The memories fall through me like raindrops: *Rose, dancing, Rose in the garden, red-faced and muddy cheeks, Rose singing in the music room, grinning at me the day she learnt to climb, sobbing in my arms, holding me tightly, washing my wounds. Her hands on*

*my cheeks as I lay dying, her beautiful, frantic voice.* How can so much mean so little? How can it all have been for naught?

Her little dried bouquets. Her collection of my gifts.

Her words.

*"All I could think about was you... if I could even think at all."*

*"Your soul is shaped like mine."*

*"You are beautiful."*

*"I was always lonely, until I met you."*

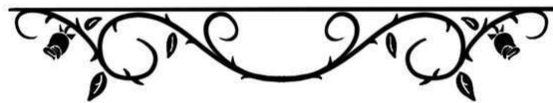
*"I don't want to leave you."*

No, no. I didn't make all of it up. I couldn't have. She was there in my soul, her heart as willing as mine, as much a part of me as any limb.

Colour begins to vanish. Sounds dribble away. I feel a rumble, far off. I know not what it is.



## ROSE



An hour later, Honour is wrapped up in bed with a little wriggling bundle, better than she has ever been in her life. Her face is glowing, love pours out of her, and she holds her baby with such tenderness and devotion that I realise that she has become exactly who she was always meant to be. She was meant to be a mother.

She looks like ours now, more than ever, which makes it all the harder when I step outside ‘for some fresh air’ knowing that I will not step back inside.

Charles sits stiffly on the step, Beau and Hope beside Papa on the bench. All eyes snap round when the door opens, their faces pale as moonlight. They have not yet heard the crying. I give them a wide grin.

“It’s a little boy,” I declare. “She’s calling him Edward, after Grandpa. He’s absolutely perfect. You can go up and see him now.”

Their faces break into the biggest, most relieved smiles that I have ever seen. They immediately barge past me, running up the stairs with such vigour it’s a wonder they don’t break.

I am an aunt now. Even if I never see him grow up, I’ll still be his aunt.

I’ll come again, I hope, on the next solstice. I shall see him a handful of times. I’ll be the strange, mysterious aunt who appears just a couple of times a year with gifts for all the birthdays and holidays and then vanishes into thin air. His magic Aunt Rose.

I am walking before I realise it, picking up the pace the second I am clear of the village. In my heart, I am already home. My arms are around Thorn's and everything is perfect and wonderful and—

A vision as clear and painful as glass hits me. I am back in the rose garden, but the roses have turned to ash. I see Thorn lying on the ground, doubled over in pain. He is screaming, and I can feel his heart shattering like a mirror.

Something falls to the ground in front of me with a lead-like thud. My necklace. The chain has snapped clean in two. Since the day Thorn gave it to me, I have never taken it off. I fidget about trying to force the chain back together, but it's no good. The stubborn metal refuses to bend. It feels foolish, but I want to cry.

It's just a chain.

It doesn't feel like just a chain. It feels like an ill-omen, a warning.

"Rose!"

Freedom is running towards me, shirt untucked, looking frantic and breathless. I didn't even notice him. He skids to a halt in front of me.

"Honour," he gasps, "Honour, I heard she was... is she all right?"

"Fine," I say, as lightly as I can manage. "A little boy. Edward. They're both fine."

"Oh, thank the—" He straightens up, running both hands through his hair. His face breaks into an awkward smile. "Well, I'm an uncle."

"Congratulations."

"I suppose I should... I should go and meet him!" He takes a few steps, looking back only once. "See you at supper!"

*No, you won't.*

"Goodbye, Freed," I say, and watch the space where he was as he vanishes from sight.



I run with a speed I never knew I possessed. My sides tear, my lungs burn, and my heart... there is a pain inside it not caused by exertion. There is

sickness, spreading, growing. And I know what it means. *I know what it means.*

“I’m coming!” I call out. “Hold on, I’m coming!”

There are only a few feeble rays of sunlight left when I burst out of the woods and into the meadow. I am so close, so close—

A grey-green stretch of darkness stares unblinking from behind the stream. No meadow, no castle, only a whisper of fog. No hint of the gateway, but it must open. It must.

Lightning fills me. The pain in my sides dissipates. I cannot—will not—stop. I throw myself down the hill, leap into the stream and scramble up the other side.

The fog gets thicker. I keep running, but I don’t seem to reach anywhere.

“Please!” I scream. “Let me in! Let me get to him! *Thorn!*”

I scramble blindly through the swirling mists, terrified that any second, the mist will clear, and I will be standing by myself, nowhere and alone.

“Please,” I beg, “I have to be with him. I’m here to set him free.”

*To set us both free.*

The outline of the castle emerges through the smog. I am filled with blissful, wondrous expectation. I am already in Thorn’s arms. I am tucked neatly under his chin. We are in our garden, and I am promising to stay with him for the rest of my life. We are starting our forever.

And then that second is over.

At first, I think I’m in the wrong place, that the portal has spat me out elsewhere. This is not my home. This is a barren, desolate place. There is a castle up ahead, but it is not my castle. It looks almost like a ruin.

Except... it is the castle. It has all its turrets, towers, doors and windows. It has the sweeping steps up to the entrance and the fountain in the courtyard, though it spews nothing but dust and air.

I don’t stand long and stare, wondering if I’ve been transported back in time. I start to move, charging up the steps and flinging open the door.

It’s cold inside, so cold. I expect to find the floor covered in dust, like when I first arrived, but it is not. Just fragments of dirt from the remnants of the garden.

“Thorn!” I cry. My words echo, but no returning voice cries out my name. I charge into the parlour, calling his name, then into the next room. I expect to see him, any second, stretched out in front of the fire, curled up in the window seat. Or he will come running in from the outside, scooping



me up in his arms and calling out my name like it's the sweetest word in the world.

But I do not see him, he does not come.

I run into his room, flinging back the curtains around his bed. It is empty, empty and desperately cold.

My room? If Thorn were the one who had vanished, I would have haunted his room until his return, searching for any trace of him, any scent.

For a moment I'm so sure I will find him there, that when I open the room, I think I see him, lying beside the hollow grate. A shape resides there, but it's not him. It is too small, grey in colour, and horribly still.

It's Bramble, and he has been turned to stone.

I crawl to his side and reach out to touch him. Nothing touches back, nothing breathes. He is rock and nothing more. I kiss his forehead, and run my fingers over his stone skin, searching for fur to wind my fingers through.

"I will fix you," I promise, "I just need to find Thorn. Then I'll come back."

There is more I want to say, but I have to find Thorn. He will not be stone. Not him. No power on Earth will still the life in him, not while my heart beats.

I run through the corridors, flinging open any door I find, screaming any name I can.

"Ariel! Margaret! Ophelia! Where are you?"

Only the walls call back. *Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?*

*Be safe, Thorn. Be alive. I've come back for you.*

Where would he go? I feel like I have searched every room. I am about to head outside and search the gardens, when I remember.

The roof terrace. The roses. What had Thorn told me once—that they were the last things to die, before? If there was any, any trace of life, that is where it would be.

I stop calling. I stop breathing. There is no room for air in my lungs with my heart lodged firmly in my throat. I pick up my skirts and flee, along the corridors, right to the door and all the way up the narrow steps. I fall over as I reach the top.

That's where I see him, lying under the rosebush, covered in dried petals. They splatter the stones around him like drops of blood.

"Thorn!"

I am at his side, frantically brushing away the petals. He has a rose clenched in his palm. I tear myself on the thorns pulling it out of his grip. His palm is punctured. I kiss it fervently.

"No, no, no..." Was this the true price of opening the gateway? Was this why he didn't want to let me go? "Wake up, please!"

I throw my head against his chest. A tiny, fragile thump beats beneath my cheek. He's alive.

I race to the fountain, scoop up the waters in my hands and sprinkle droplets over his face, into his mouth. "Thorn, please!"

Slowly, miraculously, he begins to stir. His beautiful eyes open.

"Rose," he says softly, "am I dreaming still?"

I cry with relief. "You most certainly are not!" I say, curling my hands around his clothes.

"Am I dead then?"

"Dead? No! You're as alive as I am!"

Thorn blinks wretchedly, and I shift backwards as he pushes himself up on his elbows. "You're... you're actually here."

"Clearly." I swallow breathlessly, brushing tears from my eyes.

"You came back. But, but the gateway—"

He rises up suddenly, and although the light is nearly all gone, it is still possible to see the mists dissolving. The way is still open.

"It isn't possible," he mutters. "I didn't open it—"

"You didn't?" I frown. "But then who—"

"What did you do?"

"Me? I just... I just asked it to. Prayed that it would."

"But... why?"

I open my mouth to tell him exactly why in four simple words, but before I can, Thorn's legs buckle underneath him. I slide my arms under him and we go to the floor together.

"Careful," I whisper, after a moment of holding him tightly. He is so much thinner than before. "What... happened here? What happened to you?"

Thorn sighs, inching out of my arms. "I told you that a sacrifice was required to open the gate—"

“The flowers,” I said.

“It wasn’t enough. I wasn’t strong enough to open the gate and leave enough magic here to keep her at bay. Within days, almost all the magic was drained from this place.”

“Bramble?”

“The fairies turned him to stone, rather than watch him wither and die like the rest of this place.”

“And... you?”

“I thought you were gone from me forever,” he says. “The fairies tried to convince me otherwise, but when they went... when I lost all hope that you cared for me, my heart broke. That’s a very dangerous thing, for a creature like me.”

I swallow carefully. “That’s what Ariel was trying to tell me, wasn’t it? That my leaving would cost you your life.”

Thorn nods. The words, still unspoken, hang between us. *Because I love you.*

“You’re an idiot, you know that, right?” I hiss, my eyes shut tight against the tears. “I would never, ever have gone if you’d told me that—”

“Precisely,” Thorn interrupts. “You would have stayed out of guilt, wasting away for—”

“Guilt? You think I’ve come back out of *guilt*?”

“Didn’t you?”

“No, Thorn! I came back because I—”

There is a rumble deep within the castle. Something shatters. The sound claws its way through the stone, splinters through the air. A triumphant scream sears into the sky and the clouds turn dark and cold.

“Oh, oh no...” Thorn’s eyes are wide. He pulls himself up with great difficulty, and I cling to him.

“What is it?”

“Moya,” he whispers, “she’s escaped.”

# ALSO BY KATHERINE MACDONALD



## **The Phoenix Project Trilogy**

*Book I: Flight*

*Book II: Resurrection*

*Book III: Rebirth*

## **In the “Fey Collection” series:**

*The Rose and the Thorn: A Beauty and the Beast Retelling*

*Kingdom of Thorns: A Sleeping Beauty Retelling*

*A Tale of Ice and Ash: A Snow White Retelling*

*A Song of Sea and Shore: A Little Mermaid Retelling*

*Heart of Thorns: A Beauty and the Beast Retelling*

*Of Snow and Scarlet: A Little Red Riding Hood Retelling*

## **Standalones:**

*The Barnyard Princess: A Frog Prince Retelling*

## **In the “Faeries of the Underworld” Duology:**

*Thief of Spring: A Hades and Persephone Retelling (Part One)*

*Queen of Night: A Hades and Persephone Retelling (Part Two)*

*Heart of Hades: A Hades and Persephone Retelling (Part One)*

*Heart of Tartarus: A Hades and Persephone Retelling (Part One)*

## **A Curse of Hope and Shadows**

*Part One*  
*Parts Two & Three*

**The Mechanical Kingdoms Quartet:**

*A Rose of Steel*  
*A Slipper in the Smoke*  
*A Clockwork Apple (coming 2024)*

**The Fae of the Forest**

*Forest of Dreams and Whispers*  
*Mountain of Mirrors and Starlight*

**A Throne of Pearls and Bones**

*The Soul in the Sword*  
*The Lady by the Lake*



Lightning splits the sky. The mist turns dark and rolls towards us, flooding the terrace with palpable smog.

I clutch Rose tightly to my chest. “The village,” I rush, “you must escape, warn them—”

“I can’t leave you! She doesn’t want them—”

“On the contrary, she wants everything. Everything that has been denied to her all these years. Your family—”

Rose stiffens in my arms, and her mind goes somewhere. She shakes her head. “No,” she says, “my place is with you.”

“You don’t know what she can do—”

“I know I’m going to stop her.”

“Rose—”

Before I can grab hold of her, she’s slithered from my grasp, flying from my side down the stairs. I tumble after her, nearly breaking my bones as I hurtle down to the bottom. She’s locked the door.

I hear her footsteps disappear down the corridor, my heart along with them.

*No, no, no!*

I hammer against the door, slamming my shoulder against it, but it does not budge. If I was at full strength, maybe, but I’m only a shell of my former self.

Rose cannot take on Moya by herself. What is she thinking? My mother nearly destroyed herself keeping her locked away—

Although, like me, she is unlikely to be at full strength. Her time in the Mirror has undoubtedly drained her.

But Rose is mortal. Brave though she is, she is far from unbreakable. Her will is not enough.

Moya will tear her apart.

*No!*

I groan against the wood. I'll scratch it to splinters, if I must.

I never had the chance to tell her that I loved her.

No, I had the chance. I just didn't use it. Like her, I have been too afraid. And now... now we have run out of chances, opportunities.

No. Not yet.

I won't let her die. Not for me, not for anyone. I will get her out of here. I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe, to keep her family safe—

And if it's the last thing I ever do, I am going to tell her that I love her.

I run back up to the fountain and guzzle the waters, hoping some magic clings to it still. A warmth reaches me. A faint restorative.

Something sounds in the distance, steel. A gunshot.

I freeze. None of Moya's followers would use muskets. What is going on? I can see nothing, the gardens thick and dark.

I hurtle back down the stairs and pound against the door, begging it to open. It budes, slightly. *Come on, come on—*

Something clicks against the lock. A bright, tiny spark races through it. It nuzzles my cheek.

"Ophelia?"

It's her. Smaller and fainter, voiceless, but here. There is still good magic. There is still Rose. There must be hope there too.

I topple into the corridor, narrowly missing a club as it crashes over my head. I roll out of reach, skittering backwards. My hair stands on end.

An ogre. A large, monstrous, misshapen creature. It makes another lunge for me. I dart backwards, tearing a tapestry from the wall and throwing it at its face. I'm slower than I'd like. Too slow.

And this isn't the best place to fight it.

Another fairy—Margaret, I think—drops a vase on its head. It rears backwards, falling into a side table, giving me enough time to scoot down the stairs and into a bigger room. The castle is alive with noises.

Who is fighting?

Where is Ariel?

Where is *Rose*?

A bolt strikes the plaster. I glance left and see a villager with a loaded crossbow, aiming at me.

“Wait—” I say, ducking behind a table.

The villager stills. He’s tall, fair-haired, vaguely familiar. A friend of Rose’s? I must have seen him in the mirrors. “You... you can speak?”

“Yes,” I say, keeping to my spot, “and—”

Before I can finish my sentence, the ogre smashes into the room. Its club comes crashing towards the villager. I bolt from my spot, meeting the weapon and wrenching it from its grasp. That hardly stops it. It raises its fist in the same fashion. I drop to the floor, letting it strike the wall behind, and slice upwards with my claws. I can’t make myself go deep, but it roars in protest.

The villager shoots it in the back. It slumps forward, toppling into me. Ophelia and Margaret tug me free.

“Thanks,” I say to both them, and the villager.

He stares at me. “I’m looking for a girl. Um, human, I should probably specify. Red hair?”

“Rose,” I say. “You’ve not seen her?”

“Ah, no. You... you aren’t going to attack me?”

I sag against the wall. “Not sure I could if I wanted to.”

“Are you... are you injured?”

“Not... not quite...”

Something crashes in the throne room. A long, loud scream. His eyes widen. “I should...” he says, halfway out the door. He comes back to my side and hands me his flask. “It’s just liquid courage, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Thank... thank you.”

“I’m Charles, by the way. Rose’s brother-in-law. I think... maybe you should just sit tight? I’ll come and find you when this is all over.”

He pats me on the shoulder, and is out of the room before I can tell him that I can’t sit tight. Not until I find Rose.

I drink the contents of the flask, toss it aside, and struggle to my feet. Ophelia and Margaret bat around my chest, but I wave them away. I use the servant’s staircase and half-crawl to the Hall of Mirrors. Moya’s frame

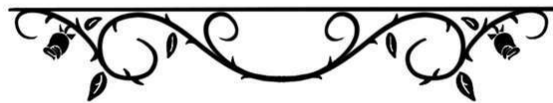


is empty. There is no sign of Rose, just shards of glass and deconstructed suits of armour. If Rose was here, she's not now. And there's no blood, which means she isn't hurt.

Which means she's probably fighting.



## ROSE



I fly from Thorn's side and bolt down the stairs, slamming the door behind me and turning the lock. How long it will keep him there, I do not know. He's too weak to fight. Hopefully he's too weak to break down the door.

What am I thinking? The truth is that I am not. All I know is that I'm not going to sit back and let her come for me, let her take Thorn away. Any thoughts of imminent death are pushed back.

I grab a sword from a nearby suit of armour and head to the Hall of Mirrors.

Moya stands there in the shards, surrounded by robes of swirling black. As the smoke clears, I see her fully. The years in the mirror have twisted her appearance beyond all kinship with her sister, turning her frame bony, shrivelling and shredding her wings to ruin. Her skin is utterly devoid of colour, her eyes black and bottomless as pitch. Her face is just as awful as I remember, just as bitter, just as cruel.

She sees me standing behind her in the reflection.

"Ah!" She wheels around. I'm rooted to the spot. My weapon feels dull and useless in my hand. "My little beauty! My heroine!"

"What... what do you mean?"

"My saviour! Honestly, I was worried there for a moment. You were so close to breaking the spell, but then dear old little Thorn had to be all noble and let you go. Used up any magic keeping me prisoner to open the

gate. I must admit, your return was a surprise, for him as much as for me. He was so sure you weren't coming, and the minute he lost all hope was the minute I knew I would be free. So thank you, Little Beauty. Thank you for finally crushing him. I am free of my container and my miserable sister—well, I don't see her around anywhere, do you?" She laughs. "All she did to save that boy... all for naught, really. She just prolonged his pain. My end for him would have been much swifter."

"Leave... leave him alone."

"He will die soon enough," she says. She snaps her fingers. Two nearby suits of armour spring to life, grab me and pin me against the wall. I struggle against them, but it's like struggling against stone.

Moya only laughs, but she massages her hand, as though the motion has damaged her. When she catches me looking, she drops her hand.

"What do you want?" I cry.

In the space of a clap, her face is pressed against mine. "Everything," she hisses. "Everything my sister would have denied me. I want power and freedom and *joy*. I want to walk amongst the humans... and have them kneel at my feet."

I cannot imagine Freedom kneeling to her. I cannot imagine the village won't fight back. Perhaps they can defeat her, after all—

But then, her own sister had to give her life just to trap her.

Freedom doesn't stand a chance. I have to stop her, or, failing that, just delay her—

"You said your sister did this to save Thorn," I rush frantically. "What do you mean by that?"

At this, Moya throws back her head and laughs until she's almost hoarse. "You truly have no idea, do you? You really are stupid, even for a human. The droplets of fey blood in you really haven't helped much at all."

"I don't know what you mean."

"The curse. My curse. It's not on the castle. It's on the *boy*. And you were so close to breaking it... I was so pleased when he let you go. For a moment, I was sure—"

"You... you stopped me from leaving before," I argue. "When you conjured that lightning. You could have just let me go a few days later—"

Moya pulls a face. "I might have acted rashly, but watching the two of you that day down by the lake... I was certain you were about to break the

curse. With his ridiculous plan for a ball and those stupid fairies' machinations... I was forced to act."

"But I stayed because of what you did—"

"Because I didn't manage to kill him! Or you. Either would have doomed this place, broken the seal on my prison. I used up so much magic in my efforts, infecting his wound when my first attempt failed..." She pauses, lifting up a fist filled with purple lightning. There is another tiny flicker in her face, a faint ripple of pain. "No matter," she continues. "Neither one of you can stop me now. And thank you for opening the gateway for me. That's going to make everything much easier."

"But I didn't open the gateway." I try to smile at her, rattle her. "And neither did Thorn."

Her eyes narrow, but there is the slightest waver in her voice. "You lie."

"Look at me. Do I really look like I have that kind of power?"

There is only one person who does, aside from Thorn, and she knows it. Her face betrays her fears.

An enormous crash sounds not far off. Shouts rally against the corridors. Moya forgets me in an instant and sweeps from the room. I see her reflection in the remaining mirrors. She glides down the corridors, clicking her fingers, bringing statues to life and pulling strange, grey, misshapen creatures out of the walls. The shadows are back again.

I have to get out. I scream for the fairies, but I know they are not coming back. Because of me, because of what Thorn did to save me, because I couldn't tell him that I loved him.

He will not die for this. He will not.

I still have movement in my legs. I press them against the back of the wall, trying to push myself up. It does no good. The surface is too smooth. I am, I realise, pressed against a mirror.

Crashes sound as the rest of Moya's army breaks free of the castle. How many can there possibly be? I hear shouting, hissing, the clash of steel. What are they fighting against?

The reflections show light coming my way. A stout grey creature bursts into the room. A troll, I think. It is short and knobbly, with a face as tough as bark. It gurgles when it sees me, raises its axe—

A bolt shoots clean through the side of its neck. It drops to the floor in a second.

"Rose!" shouts Freedom, his hands immediately flying to my face.

I have never in my life been happier to see my brother. “Freed! What are you doing here?”

Freedom immediately begins to dismantle my captors. Helmets and chest pieces clatter to the floor. They must need Moya to animate them; they are nothing more than metal now.

“This little creature brought me up here...” He gestures to the little glowing ball of light beside him.

“Ariel!” I do not know how I can tell who she is, but it is clearly her. She buzzes around my head affectionately as I struggle out of my bonds. “I thought you were gone—”

“Ariel, is it?” Freedom nods approvingly. “Thank you.”

I grab my brother’s arm and move out into the corridor. The place is awash with shadows, but also with men from the village. My brother has brought a small army of his own. “Freed,” I say, much more seriously, “why are you here in the first place?”

“I came to save you! You’re welcome, by the way—”

“It’s not safe—”

“Yes, I can see that. I didn’t come alone though, did I?” He pats his crossbow proudly.

“What made you think—”

“After I got to Honour’s, it struck me as strange, the direction you were running in. Towards the woods. I thought, at first, you were coming to get me, but when I replayed it in my head... you looked so surprised to see me. You must have been coming back here. Wasn’t sure what to expect, so I rounded up a few reinforcements and—”

A bolt of black smoke hits the wall next to us. A bust explodes into dust.

“All right, I admit it, your timing has been worse,” I tell him. “I need to get something from down the hall. Can you watch the staircase? Shoot anything... grey.”

“Roger,” he says. “You’ll get somewhere safe?”

“Of course,” I say, with no intention of keeping this promise. “And don’t hit Thorn!”

I return to the hall to collect my sword, whatever good I think it will do. I don’t think I can defeat Moya with weapons, or surely the fairy queen would not have had so much trouble defeating her in the first place. Then again...

The look in her face when she enchanted the objects, as if she were in pain. She said she had used up a lot of magic that night with the storm... how much magic had she used to free herself? She had been in there for years, and the magic of this castle, until recently, had been flourishing, and if Ariel was here... it wasn't all gone, or my return was bringing it back... If Moya wasn't at full strength—

Dodging whatever fray I can, and occasionally hitting what I cannot, I stream through the corridors in search of her. I pass by the door to the roof terrace on my way. It is open. Thorn is gone.

“Oh no...”

I pray he is somewhere safe, keeping out of the fighting. He's not strong enough. If Ariel is back, perhaps the others are too. Perhaps they are with him.

I can't look for him now. Moya is an easier target. I just keep following the signs of battle.

The ball room. The throne room. Of course that's where she is.

She stands in the centre of the floor Thorn and I danced on just a few weeks ago, her head thrown back, laughing maniacally. Servants twirl about her, jeering and cackling as they beat back the villagers.

I know these men. They are my neighbours, my friends. James Saintclair is here. And, almost worse, Charles is too. He became a father just a few hours ago. If he dies here—

No, no, I can't think like that.

Moya raises her hands to the chandelier. Purple lightning rises from her fists.

“Look out!”

I smash into Charles and knock him to the floor. Moya glares at me, but her pause gives James time to shoot at her. The arrow skids past her cheek. I hear her curse before sweeping onto the balcony.

Charles rushes to his feet, dusting off debris. “Rose!” he says. “You're all right! Thank Heavens.”

“What are you doing here, Charles?”

“Um... rescuing you?”

“You just had a baby! You should be with him and Honour—”

“Honour would never forgive me if I let—”

“Does she know you're here?”

“Well, no, I didn't want to upset her—”

I groan. Honour would never have let him come. She knew there was no danger here, well... she thought there wasn't. She was going to kill him.

James reaches our side. The rest of the creatures in the room are all dead. The fight is moving into the gardens. Good.

"Rose, are you—"

"I'm fine," I snap. I hurry out onto the balcony. Tiny droplets of blood dot the stones. "She's bleeding."

"Well, I did shoot at her—"

If she's bleeding, she can be killed by a mortal weapon. At least, that's my hope.

Down by the lake, lightning crackles along the banks. "Follow it," I say. "Be careful. Try to get her to use her magic before attacking. She's weakest then." I think. I *hope*.

"Her magic, yes," says Charles numbly. I keep forgetting this must be strange to them.

The villagers stream into the garden. I turn back into the hall. From the shadows, a monster stares at me. It is at least eight feet tall, broad as a bear, with arms so long they almost graze the floor. Despite the width of its shoulders, it is skeletal, each and every one of its bones pushing out against its ash-grey skin. There is a horrible smell of decaying flesh.

I raise my sword seconds before it begins to charge. A black shape comes soaring out of nowhere, slamming into its side and knocking it clean against a pillar.

"Thorn!"

The monster is up again in no time. Thorn is on his feet, his hair standing upright, shoulders hunched. He is still not at full strength. He should not be fighting.

The monster raises its arms and Thorn meets both of them with his. He's straining, struggling to hold his footing, losing inches of ground.

I skid towards them, sword held firmly overhead, and slice the monster's belly. Blood spurts across the marble. It howls, releasing Thorn and darting backwards to assess its injuries. It's merely a flesh wound.

Thorn is bent over, but he clambers upright before I can assist him, panting hard. He can't take much more of this, but I know nothing I can say will convince him to leave.

The monster readies itself again, but Thorn's quicker. He leaps into the air, soaring over its head, and grabs it by the throat. It struggles in his grip,

clawing at his face, but before it can do any real damage I sprint towards it and plunge my sword under its exposed ribcage.

More blood pools out of it as I tug the weapon free. Thorn drops the creature. It lies there, jerking and bleeding, while Thorn and I stare at each other, trying to catch our breath.

The snap of a bolt comes whistling through the air. It hits Thorn squarely in the side, and my heart goes crushing to the floor with him.

“No!”

Thorn slumps into my arms. His weight takes us both to the ground. I hold him there. *He’s fine, he’s fine, he’s going to be fine. It’s all right, it’s all right.*

I stare wildly over him at Freedom, standing in the doorway with a crossbow in his grip.

“What have you done?”

“He was... he was attacking you!”

“He would never—”

“Rose...” Thorn says faintly.

“He... he can talk.”

“Of course he can talk!” I snap at Freedom, before turning my attention to Thorn. I take his hand.

“But, but he’s a...”

“He’s *mine*.”

If I could kill Freedom with a look in this moment, he would already be on the ground, beside Thorn, beside my heart. I do not care if he is my brother. I want to destroy him like he has destroyed me.

Freedom stands there numbly. “I didn’t... I didn’t know. How could I? I —”

“Leave us alone.”

“I’m... I’m sorry—”

“Go away!”

Thorn squeezes my hand. “I’m all right,” he says. “Just a flesh wound, I’m sure.”

Tears run freely down my face. “You always say you’re fine when you’re not.”

“So do you.”

“Well, I’m not all right now.”



Freedom crouches down, gingerly examining the wound in Thorn's side. Not touching him. Not daring. "I might... I might be able to fix that," he offers.

Thorn looks at him, and they share some quiet understanding. There is no fury in his face. How can he forgive him so easily? Then he looks back at me. "Moya?"

"She's bleeding," I tell him, even though this is wildly unimportant right now. "I think that maybe—"

He nods. "Her time in the mirror... it has weakened her."

"The others are fighting her—"

"It may not be enough," he breathes. The action hurts him. "But perhaps... the mirror." He looks at me. I can read his thoughts like a book. "You know what to do?"

"I think so, but—"

"Go, Rose. You have to. It might be the only way."

"But—"

"I'll wait for you."

I kiss his forehead fervently, closing my eyes, shutting out the world for just a second.

"I'll take care of him," Freedom insists. He doesn't try to convince me to stay, doesn't try to fight in my place. He knows what he has done, knows what he must do.

"You better," I say. "If he dies, I die."

Then I have to run.



Pain crackles in my side. It is deep and clean, and seems to spread through the rest of me. I have never felt a wound like this before.

Ariel appears, lying against my chest, trembling quietly. Where did she come from?

I turn my face towards Rose's brother. "Did you lie to her?"

Freedom's face is grave. "I'm not sure," he says. His voice is steady, but his pause speaks volumes.

"You're a poor liar," I tell him. "You're not like her. You cannot hide your thoughts so well."

"She's always been very good at that," he admits. "Unless she's punching you, in which case it's very easy to see how she truly feels. I don't know how you've coped, being trapped here with her for so long."

"It hasn't... been easy..."

Freedom bends down to inspect the wound. He takes out a handkerchief and wraps it around the bolt, but does nothing else. There is nothing else to do.

"So, you must be the one she was talking about," he says, far too cheerfully.

"She told you about me?"

"She may have left out a couple of details..."

I knew she must have told at least Honour from looking in the Mirror, but I'm surprised she told everyone. Rose told her family about me, even

when I lied to her and kept her here. It's a small joy now, but I will take it.

"She spoke about you a great deal when she was here," I tell him.

Freedom takes off his cloak and covers me with it. I can barely feel it. "I bet."

"She loves you."

He swallows audibly. "Maybe not after today."

"You... you didn't know..."

"I was being reckless."

"You were protecting your sister. She... she'll understand... in time..."  
My eyelids feel heavy. The pain in my side seems less now. I'm not sure that's a good thing.

"Whoa, whoa!" Freedom's hand is on my shoulder. "Don't go anywhere."

"I... I can't. I have to... I have to wait..." I have to wait for her to come back. I have to see her, one last time. But I could live a thousand years, and see her every day, and still not have drunk my fill. *Please, I pray, let there be an afterlife. Let me take all of her with me. Do not erase my memories from this world. My heaven is her.*

"You love her," says Freedom.

A few minutes ago, he thought I was a monster, but there is no judgement in his face now, no disapproval. Only guilt.

"More than anything, on any world."

"She loves you too, you know. Any fool can see it. Any fool who knows her, anyway."

I know it. For the first time, I absolutely, undeniably, believe it. She came back for me.

*I'm sorry, Rose, for going first.*

*I wish I could have heard you say it.*

There is still time.

I didn't tell her, either. Not precisely, not with so few words.

A darkness flickers in my vision, and I fold into it.



“No, no! You must hang on!”

Rose? No, not Rose, *Grace*. Grace standing in front of me, screaming. Where am I? I am in some strange, white world, beneath the foot of an exquisite tree. The air crackles with gold.

“Grace?”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Am I... dead?”

“Not quite, you fool, but you’re nearly there. More so than the last time.”

There’s screaming not far off. A flash of shadow in this silvery world.

“Rose,” I say suddenly.

Grace sighs. “She’s fine,” she says shortly. “Or she will be. But she won’t be, if you’re not there when she returns to you.”

“Grace—”

“You have to save her!”

“I’m not sure I can. Your son sort of... shot me.”

“Yes, and he’s a terrible boy and I’m sure he’s very sorry, but I don’t mean like that! You have to... you have to save her from... from being the person she was before she knew you! From being herself again without you!”

“I—”

“You don’t know what she was like before, how lonely she was. You don’t realise what you are to her, what she’ll be if you should die. She won’t ever recover. She’ll be a shell of herself and nothing, no one, will ever draw her out again. Please, I’m begging you, return to her.”

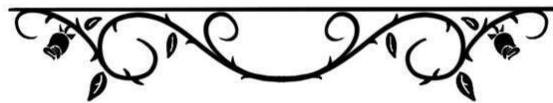
I want to. I want to more than I have ever wanted anything ever before in my life. I think of her in the rose garden, of what she was about to say. I think of her hissing at Freedom, “*He’s mine.*”

“She loves you, Thorn.”

The darkness starts to dissolve, the edges crisping like paper in a fire. It gives way to a new, deeper darkness.



## ROSE



*He will be all right. He has to be.*

There is only one thing worse than turning away from him. That is the thought of watching him die. But I cannot think of that right now. I have to think of stopping Moya. I have to save the castle, save the town, save him, save *us*. I have to make sure that Honour isn't a widow by tomorrow, though what good that will do me if I am without Thorn. My soul will sink into the abyss with his, and I will pull the world down with me.

I burst into the Hall of Mirrors and pick up a shard from the mirror that was Moya's prison all this time. It digs into my flesh. Will it be enough? Will I be able to hold onto it with enough strength? I have never stabbed anyone with a shard of glass before...

I have never killed anything remotely human before.

If Thorn wasn't dying, perhaps I would worry more about what that would be like, to take another's life. But I do not care. Somehow, I feel like stopping her will save him, and I know I would do anything, commit any evil, to keep him here with me.

Blood trickles down my palm. I am holding the shard too tightly. I rip sections out of my petticoat and bind it around both hands. It will have to do. No time to waste.

Before I leave, I have a sudden idea. I pray the extra seconds do not cost me deeply.



Light floors the garden. Half the trees are ablaze. Their leaves spasm frantically against the inky backdrop, their skeletal branches twitching. I can almost hear Ophelia wailing.

Lightning still rages against the sky. Statues and tombs explode around me. I dropped my sword after Thorn was shot. All I have now is my mirror-dagger. It's too small to fight with, and I cannot risk it breaking. It is far, far too precious.

Down on the bank, Moya raises hell, surrounded by her supporters—withered, stout, pale, grey, shadowy creatures. Many are trolls and goblins, but a few look like fairies. Fairies whose skin has turned to charcoal, whose faces are as twisted as hers.

Statues fight at her behest as well, but they crumble more easily than the others. Helmets and breastplates litter the shoreline, slivers of silver in the shallows.

Her cheek bleeds where the bolt cut her. She looks dishevelled, but her appearance only adds to her madness. It's hard to tell if she is mad with power or mad with exhaustion. Her hair is all over the place, her eyes white and wild. Purple sparks hiss from her fingers. She looks up when she sees me approaching.

“What a lovely little welcome party you’ve brought me, my beauty!” she cackles. Her voice is like ice. “I am sure they will make welcome additions to my army!”

She grabs a fistful of blue energy in her palm and tosses it at James. It hits him squarely in the chest and he topples into the shallows. I plunge after him, pulling him to the surface. He splutters and coughs and then pushes me away. His eyes are not his own.

“James—”

He raises his sword towards me, but it misses and he falls into the water. I grab the back of his shirt, wrenching him towards the bank. His hand dives for his weapon, but I hit him with the back of my hand. Hard.

He spits blood in the sand. “R-Rose?”

I turn back to Moya. Her expression drops.

“Magic not working as well as it used to?” I ask.

Moya glares. She claps her hands, and the entire garden is engulfed in a thick, tangible darkness.

“The lake!” I scream to my companions. “Get in the lake!”

It will be harder for Moya to find them there, I reason. She won’t be able to sense their movements very well. They’ll be able to hide, even if she can see through this smog as well.

I don’t need to see. This is my home. I know it in any light.

There’s a scramble in the water. Crying, shouting, flailing. I sense I only have a few minutes before the darkness begins to falter, like all of her magic. A few minutes is all I need.

Visibility returns. My heart clenches in my chest. From my hiding place, the devastation is clear. The gardens have been transformed into a wasteland, a battleground. The trees lie in flaming, crumpled heaps. The statues have been chewed up. Between the ruin of the landscape and the decimation of the shore, bodies are piled. My home is barely recognisable. I pray that the bodies I see are not my friends’.

Where are the villagers? I cannot see anything moving in the water. Not a splash, not a glimmer—

I lock eyes on James. He and the others have been tied up in weeds, held with their heads just above the surface. They are completely trapped.

“Where are you, little beauty?” Moya croons. “Come out. You cannot hide forever. I’ll burn this place to the ground, eventually. Burning to death is not pleasant, so I hear. I can give you a quicker death than that. I’ll even let you see your beloved beast again.”

Thorn. How long does he have left?

“Although, I notice he is mysteriously absent from our little soirée. Could it be that the dear old beast isn’t even with us any more?”

*No. No, he is still here.*

“I tell you what, Beauty. Surrender yourself to me, and I will let your friends live. I might even spare the whole village. What is one little village when the world will be mine? You still have a family, don’t you?”

I keep to my hiding place.

“I see, I see. How about this? I will even spare him, if he still lives. I have no need of the boy’s destruction now that I am free. You, on the other

hand, you are far too troublesome. But if I can save him, I will. Fairy's promise."

She might be the only thing, *the only thing*, that can save him. But would Thorn ever forgive me, if I surrendered to her? If I left him alone? He would never hate me, I am sure of that, but if there is a life after this one, how could I bear to watch him shoulder this world—or Moya's version of it—alone? His death would destroy me, and mine would obliterate him. It is simple; we cannot live without each other. This is not a matter of saving someone's life, but saving their soul.

It is mine that I'm sacrificing when I leap out of the tree and plunge the shard of mirror into Moya's back.

I'm hurled into the shallows. Moya cackles still, but blood fills her mouth. She spits it onto the stones, reaching round and pulling the shard from her flesh.

"This little shard... did you think... that this could contain me? Did you see the last prison that was built for me?"

She tosses it into the water. I go after it, but her hand fastens around my ankle and yanks me back to the bank. Weeds wrap around my feet. She towers over me, grabbing my fists in hers.

"What a sad attempt, beauty," she grins. "Much like your attempt to love that silly creature."

*Thorn. Thorn, I'm sorry. I'll be with you soon—*

"No last words?"

She releases one of my hands, moving to grab a fallen weapon. Why doesn't she finish me off with magic? Has she run out?

"How about these ones?" she laughs. "True love will never set you free —"

My free hand reaches into my apron pocket. Before she can turn, before she can raise her own weapon, I plunge mine into her chest.

For one long, awful minute, Moya just stands there, still, her sword in her hand... then she turns her face towards the shard of mirror resting against her heart. I can almost feel it struggling to continue beating, with the Mirror of Truth lodged inside it.

"See what you really are," I say.

The bonds around my feet shrivel away. The villagers are dropped into the water. Her remaining supporters freeze, paralysed.

"You are darkness, and dust, and poison," I say, rising above her.



Her white face begins to crumple. Her whole body seems to cave in, twitching like a spider in the flame. The clouds begin to part.

“Try surviving in the light.”

In a flash, she is gone. Her supporters vanish into shadow. The skies open, the rain begins to pour. All fires are extinguished. I barely have time to look and see if the others are all right before I begin tearing towards the castle.

*Thorn.*



Through the chaos and the debris, I race back to the castle, back to him. The others aren't far behind, stopping only to free their friends or help people up. By the time I arrive, a crowd has already gathered in the ballroom, being kept at bay only by Freedom.

Three familiar lights hover wordlessly by Thorn's side. Freedom has made a pillow for his head and covered him with a cloak. The dark stain at his side is growing bigger, and I wonder why Freedom hasn't tried to fix him. Then I remember; this is Freedom. He always knows when an arrow has hit its mark.

I look back at him, his face grey and grave.

“Rose—”

“No.”

“I'm so—”

“No!”

Thorn calls out my name and holds up his hand. I crush down on my knees, wrap my fingers around his and kiss them. His grip is frail, kitten-weak and shaking.

I don't need to tell Freedom to leave, he's already moving. Somewhere in the corner of my eye I see him go towards the door to usher people away. There are faces, faces I don't know, don't care about, have no right to be here. *Go away*, I think. There is only one person I want to be with, only one face I want to see.

“I was afraid... I would go... before you returned.”

"I will always come for you," I assure him. I stroke his cheek. "I defeated Moya. She's gone."

"I'm glad," he says. His voice is hard and laboured, and digs into me like broken glass. "The castle, at least, will be free of her..."

"Thorn," I whisper.

"Speaking of terrible relatives," he continues, "your brother has impeccable aim..."

"Free—"

"Forgive him, Rose. He did not know... what I am..."

I lean forward, holding his hand ever-more-tightly. There are only inches between us, no space at all. "I have always known," I say desperately. It is so important he understands this. "Always."

He reaches up his spare hand and strokes my hair. "Bring him here. Bring your family. The castle is yours. Use it however you will."

"I won't... I *can't*... not without you. This is our home, do you hear? Yours and mine..."

"I am glad to hear you say that." His grip tightens, and his body jerks. I have seen this in animals, kills of Freedom's. I know he has seconds, seconds left. *I have seconds left.*

"Thorn, you don't have permission to die. I won't let you. I refuse."

"Thank you..."

I graze my fingers against his temple. He moves slightly under my touch. He is still here. He can feel me. He is here and so am I.

"What for?" I ask.

"For wanting me."

I open my mouth, shake my head, and my tears slide out like venom. "*Wanting you?* Of course you are wanted. How can you even... how can you even suggest otherwise? Do you not realise what you are? I need you, Thorn. I need you to stay with me. I just... I just got you back. We're ready for our happy ending."

"Could there... ever have been... a happy ending... for us?"

I close my eyes and swallow back my tears, leaning in a little closer. I run my thumb along his lips. "Any ending when I am with you is happy."

His fingers wind through my hair, his palm presses against my cheek. He clutches me close to him and whispers in my ear. "I love you, Rose," he says. "I have always, always... Rose—"

My name is the last thing he says. His eyes glaze over. He falls away from me.

I throw myself against his chest, clutching him closely. He cannot leave. I will not let him. I wind myself tightly into his body. I will not let him go.

“I love you, Thorn. I love you. I love...”

I want to tell him how much. I want to explain to him just how seriously I cannot be without him, but the words are as lost to me as he is.

There’s a little flicker of something in his eyes, a little flash of recognition, acknowledgement.

And then he goes limp. His hand slides to the ground. I pick it up, kiss it, putting it around my neck and willing him, begging him, to wake up. To squeeze back. To say those words again, those words I have always known but never heard aloud.

“Thorn? Did you hear me? I love you. You know that, right? You have to know that. You need to know. I love you, I love you, I...”

I forget time. I forget the room, the faces, the battle. I forget everything but Thorn. I cling to him, hands holding fistfuls of whatever I can grab. I cannot let him go. This can’t be it. This cannot be happening.

“Rose...” There’s a hand on my shoulder. Freedom’s.

I try to swat him away, but that would mean separating myself from Thorn, which cannot happen. I tell him to leave, or try to. I can’t stop screaming.

“You have to move.”

*I can’t...*

“Let go of him.”

*I won’t.*

“Rose!”

His hands wrench me away. I flail against him, striking out with my fists. I scream, I beat him. I want to hurt him, to pull out his hair, to hate him. I struggle, fighting. Why can’t he just leave me?

“Get away from me! *Killer!* How could you, how could you?”

“Something’s happening...”

I force myself to look back at Thorn. I don’t want to see him dead. I just want to curl up beside him and pretend that he is holding me back.

But I can barely see Thorn’s body. He is covered in golden mist, and his fur shimmers like moonlight. The mist spreads across the floor, vanishing into the corners of the room. When it hits the grand portrait at the edge of

the hall, a sheet of light springs out onto the floor. There's a sound like a gong, and bits of light come spitting out into the room like fireworks.

A golden figure steps out of the portrait and crosses the room to where I last saw Thorn. She has dark hair flowing down her back, and a gown of pale gold that drifts across the flagstones like smoke.

Queen Eilinora.

The mist clears, and I cry out. Thorn is gone. In his place is a young man about Freedom's age. A beautiful young man, with a slightly crooked nose, and dark mane of hair the exact same colour as Thorn's fur. I have seen this face before, in my dreams, in the mirrors.

Thorn.

The woman bows down beside him, and places her long, elegant fingers over his wound. Bright light shimmers all around, and Thorn's chest begins to rise.

A scream of relief escapes me as his eyes flicker open. The same, wonderful eyes. He blinks up at the woman by his side, and all my questions about who she was—and the shrine he kept to her—are immediately answered.

"Mother?" He frowns.

The tears falling down her face are given free passage, and her smile lights up the room. "Hello, dear." She touches his cheek. "You've grown."

They embrace there on the floor, in the dust and the ruin. She sobs into his hair and kisses his cheeks, over and over. He clings to her like a child, and I cannot move.

Freedom's hands dig into my shoulders. "Mercy me..."

Eventually, the two of them part. Thorn's mother turns to me, rushes forward, and clasps my hands in hers. She looks at me as if I'm the miraculous one. "Thank you," she says, "for saving my son."

Thorn looks up at me with his strange, wondrous face. He looks as baffled to be here as I am to see him in his new, fleshy body. "Rose—" he starts.

I don't let him finish. He barely has time to hold out his arms before I launch myself into them. My arms wrap around the back of his neck and he wraps himself around me. I breathe him in. He smells just the same, but the bare skin of his cheek touches mine in a way it never did before, and lightning shoots through me of a new and alarming kind.

"Rose," he says breathlessly.

“Don’t talk.”

I inch myself back and plant my hands firmly on his face. His mouth is open, too shocked to smile. He’s alive. Alive and well and more beautiful than ever.

His fingers wind into my hair. His hands cup the back of my neck. The other slides around my waist. I know he’s feeling me differently too. It’s as if I’ve gained another sense.

Our faces slide together. Our noses touch. Our mouths collide. I am kissing Thorn, pulling him into me. My insides burn, my flesh trembles, and I feel like we will split into starlight.

Breathless, we part, see each other, and laugh. I hold his face again.

“I probably owe you an explanation,” he says.

“It can wait,” I say.

Then I kiss him again.



“W hen my son was little more than a babe, my sister placed a powerful curse on him, transforming him into a beast,” my mother explains. “She hoped, I’ve no doubt, that I would slay him myself, not seeing him for what he was. But, much like you, I saw him from the start. Despite how wild he was. A mindless creature, at first. Her magic was so strong that even I could not undo it. I managed to soften the curse, bringing back his mind, save for one night every month when dark magic was at its peak. I searched desperately for a cure and finally, Moya gave me one: my son would be restored when a true beauty, fierce in soul and fair of heart, could love him for who he truly was. However, if he loved her, and she left him and broke his heart, he would surely perish.”

“And that would be the end of every drop of good magic here,” I add. My voice sounds different, less rough. Still mine. “Any magic containing Moya would snap. She would be free again.”

“It would have broken my heart, too,” Mother says softly, her eyes still on me. “I could not have kept her away from a world without you in it.”

Rose stares at me, her cheeks bright. “But.. I did leave you.”

“It took a little while for me to lose all hope,” I explain. “I saw you in the mirror. I dreamt of you, and dared to dream that you desired to return. That hope kept me alive for a little longer, but it could never have lasted until the next solstice.”

“But... it says you just have to find someone who loves you. I have loved you for a long time!”

My chest warms. I was not sure that was the case. It still seems ludicrous that I love her, and she loves me. *She loves me.* “Apparently, you had to say it.”

“I did say it!” Rose retorts. “Just not... to you. Or in so few words. And in any case, you didn’t say anything either!”

“I did! Just in more words than you!”

“Well, I wasn’t going to say it first!”

“I asked you to marry me, Rose!”

“You didn’t say it was because you loved me!”

“It was implied!”

“You should say you love someone before you marry them. It’s rather integral to the whole business.”

I hear Ariel tutting behind me, nodding approvingly at Rose’s words. Margaret and Ophelia are beside her. All whole. Ophelia’s wings flicker with nervous energy. A minute later, Bramble comes splintering down the stairs, crashing into me and licking us fervently. We squeeze him between the two of us, the three of us together again.

“What’s your real name?” Rose asks me. It’s probably about time she knew it.

I grin sheepishly. It seems strange to say it. Thorn is my real name. “Keane. Not that anyone other than Mother ever really used it. It never quite suited.”

“It means handsome, in our language,” Mother explains.

“Of course it does.”

“But I really do prefer Thorn.”

Rose looks up at me, her eyes swallowing every new feature. The look of stark amazement on her face is utterly bewitching.

“Why did you not tell me who—what—you really were?”

“It would not have helped. If I had told you the truth—”

“I would have—”

“You would have pitied me. You cannot love through pity. I have told others, before. They tried, oh, they tried so hard, but knowing what they knew, they were trying to love me for who I could be, and not who I was.” I place a hand against her cheek. It’s like warm silk. I’ll never get used to it. “I could not risk that with you.”

“This is your secret, I take it?” she asks. “Just to be sure. There’s nothing else?”

I laugh. “No, this is it. No more secrets, I assure you.”

Mother touches my shoulder. “There are a few things you and I need to discuss.”

As much as I don’t want to be apart from Rose, not right now, not after everything, Mother is right. And I want to be with her, too. My first memory of being held by her comes from a few minutes ago. I’m eager for another.

I keep my eyes on Rose as Mother leads me away, smiling nervously. We have a lot to discuss too.

Mother sweeps me into the parlour, not even troubling to close the door, and launches herself at me again.

“My boy,” she whispers, “my baby.”

I collapse into her arms, and we slide to the floor, the tears spilling out of us furiously.

After a while, I find something resembling a voice. “I thought you were dead.”

“I nearly was. Everything that I was was tied up in keeping Moya at bay, keeping the place alive, just a little longer...”

“And opening the gateway, right?” I ask. “It was you who let Rose back in.”

“Yes,” she nods, still clutching onto me. I’ve slid down to her middle and am resting against her lap. I never remember being held this way by her as a baby, but it feels right.

“And... the first time, too? You lured Rose here in the first place.”

“Yes.” She swallows. “Do you blame me?”

“She might.”

She smiles. “I doubt that. I doubt that very much.” She climbs to her feet, pulling me upright. “About Rose, dearheart—”

“Please, Mother, don’t say anything about her not being royal, because —”

“I like her.”

“Oh. Good. Because I was just about to demand you turn me back into a beast. I have no intention of being human without her.”

“I like her,” says Mother more fervently, “and I look forward to getting to know her better. Although, I think I should leave the two of you alone



for a while.”

“Alone? Mother, where will you go—”

“I wish to search for the remainder of our court, the ones I cast out to protect. If any still live, I would have them return, if they wish.”

I am not anxious to have her disappear again, however much I might fill that time with Rose. But I doubt she will be leaving immediately. We still have time. We’ll have years in which to get to know each other again.

“I... I never thanked you,” I start. It seems the most important thing. “I never even wanted to thank you, not till now. For what you did. What you sacrificed to save me.”

She touches my cheek. “A mother will do anything to save her child.” She looks behind me, and I see Rose waiting by the door. My heart thumps just looking at her, like she’s the one that’s been transformed. Perhaps she has. She is no longer this torturous goddess, but a real, living creature who wants to be with me.

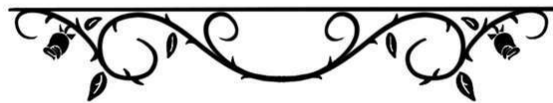
“Go and clean yourself up,” Mother suggests. “I should like to talk with Rose for a moment.”

“Please don’t frighten her off.”

“She is not one to scare easily.”



## ROSE



I walk back to the meadow with Freedom and the rest of his party. Bramble accompanies us. Dawn is spreading across the castle, and the sudden burst of magic has quietly brought life back into the garden. It sleeps, softly, like the day before the first snowdrops of spring. Closed buds hum in the bushes.

Everything is so perfectly still that the gentle trickle of the stream seems voluminous. A delicate silver bridge arches over the widest part. Freedom stops, half-shrugging, half-laughing. Everyone else totters over, as if in a dream. Nothing else can surprise them today.

“I imagine this means you are remaining put, for the present,” he says, one hand on the railing. He gazes out at the mountains. “I need to go,” he continues, as if I didn’t expect this. “The rest of the village should be told—wouldn’t want them to worry, or do something stupid. You know, like I did.”

I cannot think of something to say in response to this. I am still angry with him. I will never forget the terror of almost losing Thorn, the fear of being split in two. It is a mark, a brand against my heart. My anger at Freedom will fade much quicker.

“You are a strange couple,” he says eventually.

I knot my brows together. “We’re not,” I say resolutely. “We are both very similar. I never knew myself, until I knew him.”

Now it is Freedom’s turn to frown. “You have always been yourself.”

“Not with other people.”

“Well, that’s embarrassing—my little sister being wiser than I am.”

“It’s not the first time, Freed.”

“No, I guess not. I hope I know what it’s like, some day.” He pauses for a moment. “The willowy fairy girl, with the lovely eyes—”

“Ariel?”

“Yes. Is she—”

“Don’t.”

“Right. Well. One more question.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you have a wolf for a pet?”

I frown. “Bramble’s not—” I glance back at my large, yellow-eyed companion. “Oh. OH! He... he didn’t look like that when we got him! Oh... this explains a few things...”

Freedom laughs, already over the bridge. “That’ll teach you not to judge by appearances,” he scoffs.



Back in the castle, I find the whole place lit with a strange, luminous glow, as if someone has washed away a film of dust I never noticed before. Ariel, Ophelia and Margaret are already sweeping up the debris by the time I return.

“Don’t you three ever rest?”

“No,” they say in synchronise.

Ophelia drops her broom and literally flies into me. “Look, Rose, hands! I have real hands again, and wings!”

“They suit you.”

“I know!”

Ariel casts a cursory glance over me. “Hmm, not the outfit I would have chosen to meet the mother-in-law in...”

I look down. My dress is ripped to shreds, covered in mud, spots of blood, and pond weed. My skin is splattered with scratches. I can only

imagine what my face looks like. Another part of me giggles. She called the queen my mother-in-law.

“Rose garden,” she suggests. “I’ll lay out some clothes for you.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Rose garden!” the fairies snap.

I think it is best to listen to them, and slowly make my way upstairs. Thorn and his mother are conversing in our parlour. The door is wide open, and their voices far from hushed. I cannot help but overhear them. I lock eyes with the Queen, and sense that I’m supposed to stay. Thorn follows her gaze, smiling when he sees me. He looks back to his mother.

“Please don’t frighten her off.”

“She is not one to scare easily.”

Thorn leaves the room, brushing the back of my hand with his as he does so. There is a strange nervousness between us now. Before either of us can utter a word, Ophelia comes flying straight down the corridor, accompanied by the other fairies. They swamp him and immediately drag him off down the corridor.

The Queen calls to me. “Did you hear all that?” she asks.

I nod. “I should warn you, I’m a terrible eavesdropper.”

She holds up her hand dismissively. “I counted roughly three times. There’s plenty you missed.”

That’s one of my theories confirmed. “You’ve been here then, the entire time?”

“More or less.”

It must have been awful, watching her son in such pain, unable to help him. For a minute, I wonder if she resents me for not freeing him sooner, but I don’t sense anything like that from her. I believed her when she said she liked me.

“You will never be queen, you know,” she says.

“Thank Heavens for that. I would make a very awkward one. It might even have had to turn him down because of it.”

The Queen does not smile. “My son is only half-fey. He has inherited some magic from me, but he has his father’s mortality. I will outlive him by centuries.”

My mind flashes back to a conversation I had with Thorn, ages ago, when I first arrived at the castle. ‘Being here is not *my* punishment.’ The curse placed on him was Eilinora’s punishment, and although her son

survived, she has nevertheless endured the worst of it. She had lost him: lost his childhood, lost his future, and now, lost him to me.

“He has so many years left, though,” I remind her. “So many still for you to spend with him—”

“So many for *you* to spend with him,” she interrupts. “I like you, Rose. I may envy the years you will have with him that I will not, not truly, but I like you nonetheless. I could not have chosen better.”

“But you did choose me.” I realise, with a sudden clarity that no one could have accused me of in the past. “It was you who conjured the flowers that lured me here in the first place, and the rain that made me go into the castle.”

The Queen falls silent. It was not Moya’s magic that trapped me here. Moya wanted me gone.

“The castle had maybe a year’s worth of magic left,” she admits quietly. “We were running out of time. I knew the gateway was open, I felt the presence of a young girl nearby. I took a risk. Do you blame me?”

I should, perhaps, but how can I, when I have Thorn because of it? “And... and you opened the way to let me back in, didn’t you?”

She nods. “Most of my magic was always focused on keeping Moya locked away. I had to... I had to vanish completely from Thorn’s life when he was still very little, in order to preserve my power. I kept some for emergencies; that was certainly one of them.”

“Did you send me the dreams? Were you the one who let me know he was in trouble?”

At this, the Queen startles slightly. “No,” she responds slyly, “that, I think, was all you.”

“Is that my power, do you think?” I ask finally. “I know I’m supposed to have one. My mother could sense the future, I think, but I—”

“Have you not worked it out yet?”

I shake my head.

“You see the truth of things,” she says. “Or the potential of it. The gardens, the weather, mimic your feelings. It would not have been so strong, in your realm, but I imagine you kept a lovely garden. You imagine a thing as beautiful, and so it becomes so. It was you who brought life back to this place, and your connection alone that brought about any dreams you had.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s no small thing, to see a thing as beautiful.”

“I just... I thought it would be more important, is all.”

The Queen smiles, and reaches out to touch my cheek. All the queenly pretence evaporates with that touch. She reminds me of my own mother. “It was very important to me,” she finishes, and sweeps across the threshold, down the long hall, to the gilded chamber where Thorn’s ruined cradle lies.



I leave the room, stopping briefly at the threshold to brush the back of my hand against Rose's. Her warmth ripples into me, and I feel giddy and nervous in a new, exciting way.

Before either of us can utter a word, Ophelia comes flying straight down the corridor, accompanied by Margaret and Ariel. They drag me away to my bedroom and fold me into one giant embrace, kissing my cheeks and ruffling my hair. All of them are crying profusely. None more than Ariel.

"I really... thought... you were... dead..." she sobs. "I hate you... so much..."

"I love you too, Ariel," I say, bringing her back against my chest. She seems strangely small to me, even though I've held her before when I was a great deal taller.

Margaret pinches my cheeks. "I told you it would turn out all right in the end, didn't I?"

"I should never have doubted you."

"Good," she says, and her grip on my cheek becomes tighter. "Never do so again."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm going to run you a bath," Ophelia chirps. "You're filthy."

"I'm going to find you some new clothes," says Ariel. "These rags are falling off you."

"Come, ladies." Margaret claps her hands. "Let's make him a prince."



I cannot tell you precisely what happens during the rest of the day; minutes and hours pass in a blur, short on substance but long in length. The castle is swept and tidied and primped, the gardens cleared of debris, and food is laid out in the old-fashioned way, though I have no appetite for it. Murmurs of preparing it for guests flitter about. I see so little of Rose during this time, and the fairies seemed to have multiplied, appearing everywhere all at once and creating a bustling hive of energy. I grow tired. I long for the solace of our empty castle, and realise, with odd longing, that it will never be empty again.

Mother eventually steals me away to my bedroom. We talk for a long, long time, and finally she drifts off to sleep. Margaret comes in to remove her crown and shoes, to tuck her up and keep her company in case she wakes.

“She’ll have some adjusting to do,” she warns me. “But we’ll help her, have no fear.”

Ariel appears in the doorway, winking. “Want me to make up a bed for you elsewhere?”

I’m not sure what to say to that, but I know I have no chance of sleeping just yet. Margaret, as if reading my thoughts, narrows her eyes.

“Come, I’ll be your chaperone,” says Ariel, linking our arms together. “I’ll make sure nothing untoward happens.”

“I doubt that,” Margaret tuts, but she does not stop us. Bramble, who has been diligently beside me all evening, slips out with me. I ruffle his head but I’m not sure I really want him coming to visit Rose with me. Not tonight.

Ariel walks me almost as far as Rose’s door, and slows to a halt. “All right,” she says, “this may seem completely irrelevant, but I’ve not had a body in a very long time so... I’m just putting this out there. I know he shot you, but would you be all right with me maybe having a bit of a thing for Rose’s brother?”

I blink at her incredulously. “You just met.”



“Yes, but he’s really pretty. And he’s all tough and brave... and he paints! I love artists.”

“I don’t have a problem with his shooting me,” I say. “Rose might.”

“Ah, she’ll come around.” Bramble nudges her hand, and she bends down to pet him. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you? You know, when you and Rose first adopted a wolf, I did not think it was going to end well, but he is very sweet, I grant you.”

I pause. “I’m sorry, a wolf?”

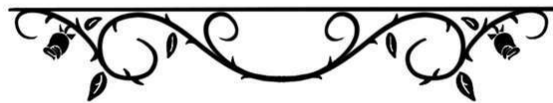
Ariel sighs, half-laughing. “You and Rose are such idiots. Perfect for one another.” She slaps my rear, causing me to jump, and kisses my cheek. “Be good, Prince. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I’m not sure that limits my options.”

“Well, precisely,” she says, halfway down the corridor, tugging Bramble along with her. “Good luck!”



## ROSE



It feels like it will be days until Thorn and I are alone again, and eventually, defeatedly, I drift off to my room.

The candles are all lit, the bathtub filled with hot, soapy water. A basket of roses sits on the table, and Ariel darts about the room, making the bed and laying out the clothes. She grins when I come in, flopping down on the bed she's half-made.

"I'm your lady's maid!" she announces.

"Says who?" I pretend to be annoyed, even though I am secretly overjoyed. I am going to like getting to know Ariel better.

"Me," she declares cheerfully, and then leaps off the bed to help me unlace what remains of my dress. "In unrelated news, does your brother have a—"

"Please don't finish that sentence."

She sighs dramatically. "I haven't had a body for so long, I think I deserve a little—"

"Stop, please, I beg you."

Ariel pushes me into the bath and dumps a jug of water on my head. I make a joke about missing her fairy form and she splashes me before pouring in a heaped measure of something soft and calming into the waters. This is by far the best bath I have ever taken. I soak for hours.

Eventually, Ariel helps me out of the bath and finishes scrubbing me dry. I slip into my dressing gown. There's a tray with warm soup on the

table. I realise how long it's been since I've eaten.

"I'll leave you alone now," she says, and turns to go.

It is blissfully quiet, dark and warm. I finish the soup, licking the plate clean. I have never been so famished in my life.

There's a knock at my door and I smile. I don't need to answer it. A second later I turn around and Thorn is there. I leap into him with such force that it knocks him into the wall. I forgot that he's not as strong as he once was.

"Careful," he whispers huskily. "I'm struggling with my balance slightly. I have to admit, I'm missing the tail."

I grin up at him. "Does it feel right though, this body?" It certainly feels right to me.

His smile is slight, but erupts out of him when he slides his hand across my bare shoulder, stopping right before my night-dress begins. "Like everything I imagined and more."

Our lips are together again, and my skin explodes under the sensation of his. We wheel around, and end up in the chair beside the hearth, barely breaking for air.

When we do finally pull back, breathless and giddy, I run my fingers over his features, learning every new inch of him. How can he still look so much like his beastly self? I curl my fingers into his hair and kiss him some more, while his fingers explore the inches of my uncovered skin with new skill. The feel of his flesh against mine sends fire down my spine. I place my hands on his neck, brushing against his collar, and desperately wish the rest of his clothes would just melt away. I wonder what he would say if I asked him to remove them.

For minutes, moments, hours, we sit in perfect silence, breaking only to giggle. There is no need to talk for that time, there is nothing to say. Eventually though, Thorn speaks. His soft fingers are wrapped around my hair while I stroke the smoothness of his chin.

"Better?" he asks.

"I almost miss the hair."

Thorn laughs. "I suppose I could grow a beard."

I tug on the tiny cleft in his chin. "I don't know. I like you this way, too."

"You are so difficult to please."

I press the tips of my fingers to his lips, and his palm brushes my cheek. Neither one of us dares look away.

"I like you this way, too," he says.

I tilt my head, catching his hand against my shoulder. "What way?"

"All the ways." Thorn's mouth twitches crookedly. He leans down and kisses me with it, just briefly, eyes open, as if he doesn't want to stop looking.

My hands return to his features. "If all that it took to break the spell was for me to say I loved you," I ask, "why would you not say it first?"

"I didn't know you had to say it," Thorn tells me. "All the curse said was that I had to find someone to love me. I didn't know if she just had to fall for me, act on those feelings, or announce them. Ariel suspected that the latter was the case, but we couldn't be sure. I convinced myself that whatever you felt for me, it didn't quite match the level of my affections. I mean, I hoped, desperately. You gave me plenty of reason to hope. Your desire to return if you ever left, your insistence that you wouldn't forget me... when you lost your chance to go home to save me. But I thought your feelings might have strayed into the realm of familial. Whenever I questioned you about them, you seemed to suggest that anyone would have done what you did. I thought perhaps that, although you cared for me, your actions were motivated by morals rather than love. Then... the gardens started to die. I knew that somehow they were tied up in your feelings, and I took it as a sign. Either you didn't love me, you had fallen out of love with me, or you didn't love me enough."

My heart aches with the pain I must have put him through. I thought my feelings, confused as they were, were plain to see. I was worried my heart was too visible, I should have been afraid it was too hidden.

"You still should have told me," I say quietly.

Thorn groans but does not pull away. "I did, Rose! At least, I tried—"

"Well, you did an appalling job—"

"Did you not hear my poem—"

"Had you actually said it, of course I would have said it back—"

"I didn't know that!"

"How could you not know that? It practically sung from my skin."

"I hoped, Rose. I really did. I so desperately wanted to tell you, but I was... afraid. Afraid in the way a normal, mortal man would have been."

“Well,” I say softly, playing with the folds of his shirt, “I can understand that. I was terrified in a normal, mortal way too. It had so little to do with your being a beast,” I explain, desperately hoping he understands this, “and so much to do with my being afraid of the hurt.”

“I would never hurt you.”

“You would if you died. Which, by the way, you come close to a lot. No more of that, please.”

“I will do my very best.”

I lie down against his chest, and stay there for a while, listening to the beautiful beat of his heart. *My heart.* “When did you fall in love with me?”

Thorn smiles, his heart beating a little faster. “I cannot put a time or date to it,” he replies. “But early, very early. I was quite taken when you didn’t scream at me.”

“Be serious!”

“I am. I may look quite the dashing fellow now—”

“You have always been a dashing fellow—”

“And I would hate to be accused of having low standards, but I do prefer it when my prospective companion does not scream in terror at the sight of me.”

I snicker a bit at his dripping tone, and snuggle back against him.

“Your laugh,” he says quietly.

“What?”

“I loved the first time you laughed at me, when I teased you about your snort. My life has not had much laughter in it, and I saw a different side to you then. But I knew I truly loved you the night after you tried to take down a pack of wolves for me. I dared to dream, then, that you cared for me. I never stopped dreaming, after that night. You were my salvation and my doom, and every day afterwards was an ecstasy of agony, wondering which you would be.”

“I knew I loved you when I thought that you were going to die,” I whisper, and then clarify. “The first time, when I stayed. I knew then. But I loved you that day before, down by the lake. I loved you the night on the rooftop, when I almost fell asleep in your arms. I loved you when we made music together, when I fell from the tree, and didn’t want to move. I think I even loved you that first day in the roof garden, when you wanted to kiss me, because I wanted to kiss you too.”

Thorn leans across and kisses me again. His mouth crinkles into a smile. "Say that again."

"Um... I wanted to kiss you too."

"No," he whispers, "just the part when..."

"Oh," I say, "oh. I love you."

He kisses my neck. "Again."

"I love you. I love you, I love you..."

I want to call out, *forever, always, for eternity*. I want to tell him until the words lose meaning, but I do not. Those words will never lose their meaning, nor the shape they bear being so long in the making.

Firelight dances around the chamber and flames give way to ashes. Outside, the wind howls, and the rains come crashing down. The world moves and shifts and changes. I pull Thorn gently towards the bed and sit down, arching backwards. I take his hand, place it on my shoulder, and guide his fingers. Slowly, gently, we peel back the layers of cloth dividing the two of us. The slightest touch of Thorn's flesh on mine makes my insides sing. I am bursting with bubbling, liquid gold.

We do not discuss it, we are past words now, both breathlessly, wordlessly eager to eclipse the one gap between us. He may, at one point, ask me if I'm sure. I say yes.

Thorn's lips touch my neck. His warmth spreads through me. The kisses descend. My fingers graze his back, glide down the shape of him, feel him in places I never knew existed. I pull his face back to mine and tug his body so that it covers me completely, and then I kiss him so deeply I could drown.

I don't want his face anywhere but here. I want his kiss to merge with mine, I want to press our bodies together until not a cell remains of me that isn't anchored to him.

We do not sleep. Afterwards, we lie in the candlelight, tracing new parts of our bodies. We whisper to each other, holding each other until the candles have worn away to stubs and faint traces of dawn glitter along the horizon. I lie my head on Thorn's chest and count every heartbeat. And then, at the exact same time, our eyes link together, and we ask each other the exact same question.

"Will you marry me?"

## EPILOGUE



Rose and I crawl into each other's beds from that day forward, together in skin like we are in soul. Never to part. Never again. I gained two bodies in returning to this form, Rose is so much a part of my very flesh. It takes some getting used to, but she is there to help me, and to show me delights I never knew existed. I do miss my strength at first, and the lack of my tail, but every time she touches me, it's worth it. I could never miss anything the way I missed her.

Besides, I can still pick her up, which is really all I need my strength for, and I do enjoy not towering over her.

It makes kissing easier, and her laugh is even more intoxicating up close.

"I have decided I do not miss the hair," says Rose one night, stroking my chin, kissing the space beneath my lips.

"I have decided you're not as difficult to please as I first thought."

I find a moment to tell her about Grace visiting my dreams, and she does not cry, but holds me and whispers thanks that her mother never truly left her.

Neither of us ever lose ourselves to grief again.

Meeting the rest of her family, and getting to know them, is an interesting affair. Honour, naturally, is a delight from the start, embracing me the first time we meet and proudly presenting her child as my nephew. I love them both immediately, and soon come to think of her very much as

my own sister. She and Charles are frequent visitors. Hope is harder to win over, but giving her free rein of the library helps, and although Beau is a little disappointed that I am no longer a beast, he is eventually won over too.

Rose's father is a more difficult case. He is not the most talkative of people, and it is clear that he blames me, at least a little, for removing his daughter from his care. We have, however, a shared love of Grace, and when I tell him about her and what she did for me, and take him to the mirrors to see her again, he begins to come around.

Preparations begin in earnest for our wedding, barely four weeks after the curse was broken. The night before the ceremony is the only time Rose and I are ever apart. Freedom remains guiltily wary of me for a little while, but the night before the wedding, while Rose is ensconced in her room with her sisters and the fairies, he and Charles arrive at my door with whiskey and cigars. I find both to be perfectly horrid, but Charles and Freedom are excellent company.

"I daresay marriage to Rose isn't going to be easy," Freedom slurs at one point, "but good luck regardless. My sister is not easy to live with."

"Honour is a delight," says Charles defensively.

"Honour *can* be a delight," Freedom concurs. "But Rose isn't."

"I think Rose is a delight," I say.

Freedom groans. "She has a terrible temper."

"I'm aware. I still think she's a delight."

"You're both as bad as each other."

Charles claps him on the back. "You'll find out one day, old chap."

"I sincerely hope not."



Our wedding is a relatively intimate affair, by the standards of the fairy court, as much of it is still at large. Thorn does insist on inviting the entirety of the village, in thanks for flocking to my rescue, which raises the numbers substantially. He also insists that his mother uses both of his



names for the ceremony, his birth name becoming one that only his mother whispers, my own name for him so *his* he claims it's branded on his bones.

It takes a while for Freedom to work his way back into my affections, and it isn't until the day of our wedding that I thoroughly forgive him, when he thrusts a clumsily wrapped book into my hands.

"A book, Freedom?" I say, turning up my nose. "I'm afraid I already have all of the books."

"Trust me," he says, "you don't have this one."

Slowly, carefully, I pull back the wrapping. It's a thick leather-bound book, with a large golden title. *Beauty and the Beast*.

"Not that *I* think you're beautiful," he adds. "I just enjoy the alliteration."

I peel back the first page, revealing a beautiful illustration of a girl in a long red cloak, a basket of berries at her hip, staring out over a frosty landscape at a field of flowers.

"Freedom..." I flick through the other images. The detail, the artistry is incredible. I feel a lump rising in my throat.

"Ariel helped me with some of the finer details," he admits. "I hope she didn't exaggerate too much."

"You've been spending a lot of time with her."

"We've been working on this!"

"Is that the only reason?"

"No," he admits cautiously. Then, "Do you like it?"

"I didn't even know you could read!"

He punches me in the arm, and he knows that he is forgiven.



Rose starts to forgive Freedom after the wedding, and he becomes a frequent visitor, eventually moving in and installing himself as 'captain of the guard'. He spends a lot of time painting for someone supposed to be a guard, and Ariel, meanwhile, develops a sudden interest in this pastime. We become fast friends. It is hard not to grow to love someone who loves Rose almost as much as I do, especially when he offers you private

painting lessons and teaches you how to fight with a sword when your bare hands are no longer an option. By the end of the first year, he feels as much my brother as he is Rose's—although he continues to be a lot nicer to me than he is to her.

"I will admit," he says, sparring with me one day, "I often wished for a brother more my own age, but I didn't think my sister would have to get kidnapped by a talking beast to achieve it."

"You have Charles," I tell him, dodging a blow. "And I didn't kidnap her."

"Semantics," he shrugs, darting out of range. "Also, you're my favourite. Don't tell Charles."

My cheeks grin. "Why am *I* the favourite?"

Freedom disarms me, flinging my sword into the distance. "Because you're easier to beat."



Not long after our wedding, Eilinora leaves the castle to search for the remainder of her court. Her visits home are not frequent at first, and Thorn and I spend many years more or less alone—or alone as we can be when Freedom moves in and barely a day goes by without me visiting the rest of my family, or them visiting me. Honour's home feels as much my own as the castle. James and I become better friends than ever, and I get to know Delly so well that I'm there for the birth of their first child, too.

I never knew I could have this—family and friends and *Thorn*, and while I still think I would have given up the former for the latter, I am so, so grateful that I never had to.

Thorn and I travel too, sometimes with Eilinora, sometimes by ourselves. We visit places we both thought we would never see outside of an image, towering cities of spires and clouds, lands of spice and colour, shores of golden sands and glistening seas.

We never spend one day apart.

We never will.



I will not pretend that Rose and I never fought again. We still have our arguments, our secrets, our fights and our make-ups. Sometimes we yell at each other, “I didn’t actually agree to marry you, you know!” and Rose will scream that she’s very glad she didn’t give up her family for me because she’s going off to stay with them. Usually, she gets halfway there and turns back, declaring that she left me once and has no intention of ever doing so again.

We drive each other to lunacy sometimes, and Rose often declares exasperatedly that the only thing worse than living with me is living without me. Our disagreements are always short, and we more than make up for them.

For the first few years after our marriage, it is just the three of us; Rose, myself, and Bramble. Rose declares she likes it this way, and we take certain preventative measures to keep it so for a while. We travel, we explore, we adventure. We do everything, together.

One day, I wake to find our bed half-full. I find her on the roof terrace, face shining in the early morning sun. She is gazing out at the grounds. “Are you ready for another journey?” she asks me.

“Where are we going?”

“Nowhere, this time,” she smiles secretly, and takes my hand. She places it against her stomach. “But it will be a journey nonetheless.”

The joy of that moment is eclipsed only by the feeling of holding our daughter in my arms for the first time, when I feel divided and doubled all at once.

She’s as perfect as her mother, with deep blue eyes and velvety tufts of dark red hair.

Moments after she is born, everyone leaves the three of us alone, and we lie together on the bed, completely stunned by the fact this person exists who is a part of us both, and that there are now three where two used to be.

“Briar,” I whisper to Rose. “Let’s call her Briar.”



Two new lives begin that day, our daughter's, and *ours*. From that day on everything is different. The world has been rewritten. We are no longer *Rose and Thorn*. We are Rose, Thorn and Briar. Another family. A new life.

I don't expect to love being a mother as much as I do. It was always something I feared in the same quiet way I once feared telling Thorn how I felt about him. There was also what happened to my mother. All the fairy magic in the world can't completely dispel the danger of childbirth.

But it helped, knowing that Eilinora and the fairies were on hand, and when it came down to it, I wanted Thorn's baby. A baby that was his and mine.

Briar is everything I never knew I wanted. She fills a part of me I never knew was lacking. I am not as devoted to her as Honour is to her children—there are times I am all too happy to hand her over to someone else—but I am amazed at every simple thing she does, the way she steps closer into being her own self with every passing day.

Thorn, to the surprise of no one, is as dedicated to his daughter as the Earth is to the sun. He is her guardian, her protector, her devoted follower. It takes him weeks after she's born to go anywhere without her. He cries after her first word. He worries to the point it *infuriates* me.

Freedom teases him relentlessly, but then he and Ariel marry and eventually have two daughters of their own, and he becomes just as bad. His children tease him just as much as he deserves.

I enjoy his suffering immensely. It really does serve him right.



I expect nothing to eclipse the magnificence of the moment when Briar was born, and yet it grows every time we add to our family. Briar, Grace, Leo and Liberty—each one as wonderful and maddening as the last. Briar is stubborn and adventurous, more likely to go on a quest than read about one. She’s the leader of the group, coming up with grand schemes and plans that often land them all in danger. Grace is a lot more like her namesake, kind and sweet. She loves music and gardening and people. Leo is quieter, more reflective—a lot like his Aunt Hope and not much like my father, though he has a quick wit when the occasion calls. Liberty is loud and boisterous, ready to start a fight, or finish one.

I could not have imagined this, the day I met their mother. I could never have foreseen a bliss like this would ever await us. Rose walked into the castle and gave it life, made it a home, gave me a family. No magic compares to the beauty of the world we make together. Our kisses may not always feel like fireworks, and surely as the sun, flames turn to embers over the years. Seasons pass, years turn into decades, and we weather every storm that comes our way. We endure. We quietly triumph. We burn.

One day, after we have left this world, I know my mother plans to close the gate, possibly forever. We will be forgotten by the world of men, pass into the castle’s history, dissolve into dust. But we live gloriously whilst we can. We tell our story to our children, to our nephews and nieces, to our grandchildren and great-children, and to all those that come to share our home.

“It began in winter,” I always start, opening Freedom’s book, “when a Thorn fell in love with a Rose...”

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



**M**y beta readers, as always, deserve the highest praise for all their suggestions, so a massive thank you to Tania and Stephanie. I wish I'd had you the first time I published the original!

An astounding thank you to Rachelle Raeta, an astonishingly talented writer (seriously, go check out her stuff) and all around fabulous person, for not only designing the cover of this special edition, but formatting this fantastic interior. It's my most beautiful book yet!

Thanks also to Gianni Filizzola for the gorgeous artwork. Your work is truly stunning.

And thanks to Elisha Bugg of Inkwolf Designs for the chapter headers and interiors. Every time I commission you, I think "she can't top that" and yet you always do.

And to the readers who took a chance on this book and changed my life with your own words of praise and affirmation—thank you. You rescued me as surely as Beauty rescued her Beast.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katherine "Kate" Macdonald writes the books she wishes she could have read more of as a teen—stories of fierce girls and gentle boys, of romance and adventure, and where the "three Cs" (chemistry, communication and consent) reign supreme. There may still be a little bit of miscommunication along the way, but she tries not to rely on that trope too much!

She loves books packed with witty banter, stories where you can feel the love growing between a pair, that include excellent, well-developed side-characters and a few subtly-foreshadowed twists and turns. She despises toxic relationships and tales that rely on old-fashioned notions of male and female stereotypes. She enjoys bending expectations and crafting worlds where sexism is non-existent. She considers herself an LGBTQIA+ friendly author, and her stories include a range of characters from within the community and absolutely no discrimination in sight.

She holds a BA in English and Creative Writing from Lancaster University, and a PGCE in teaching English and Drama from the University of Exeter. She's been a writer since she was old enough to hold a crayon, but it was only after surviving a year of parenthood and a full-time job on less than six hours of sleep a night that she finally gained the courage to publish her debut novel, "The Rose and the Thorn." It's a

retelling of Beauty and the Beast inspired by a dream of a girl surrounded by snow in a field of flowers.

At her heart, Macdonald is storyteller, and it is her dream to inspire others in the way that she has been inspired.

She lives in Devon with her manic child and well-behaved cats.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor, or subscribe to her website at [www.katherinemacdonaldauthor.com](http://www.katherinemacdonaldauthor.com) to be notified of new releases and free review copies!